Interreligious Dialogue and Cultural Diplomacy in the Middle East

Dr. Thomas Scheffler

Paper prepared for the 10th annual congress of DAVO
(Deutsche Arbeitsgemeinschaft Vorderer Orient, Hamburg, November 20-22, 2003)

Reconciliation, Realpolitik, and Interreligious Dialogue

In September 1998, when I was working in Lebanon to prepare a conference on "Religion between Violence and Reconciliation", a small group of young Christians happened to walk through the streets of Beirut. They called themselves "*Reconciliation Walk*" (*masīrat al-muṣālaḥah*) and distributed leaflets saying they were apologizing for the Crusades which had been launched in 1095.

In 1998, the "politics of saying 'sorry'" was not a particularly familiar pattern in Middle Eastern politics. The reactions of the Beirutis to whom I talked were not unfriendly, but they displayed a certain benevolent bewilderment: Sure, it is never too late to repent, but in this case the apologies came *nine hundred years* after the event, and, furthermore, they were surprisingly silent about the *present* attacks the Arab-Muslim world was subjected to, most notably the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, or the devastating embargo against Iraq. After all, it had been in February 1998 that Osama Ben Laden and his associates, invoking a long list of contemporary Muslims' grievances, had published their famous "Fatwa"-statement calling for defensive Jihad against Jews and "Crusaders".

Nevertheless, rethinking the Crusades is a most timely undertaking because it calls to our attention how much times have changed since the 11th century: the Crusades had been preached by *religious* authorities, namely, the Popes, while the ruling lays – the kings and emperors of Christian Europe – had been often reluctant to follow papal guidance. Today, the fronts seem strangely reversed. Western lay politicians are using religious language to legitimize political warfare in the Middle East, whereas religious leaders, and most notably the Pope, are among the most visible advocates of peace in the world. As a matter of fact, "interreligious dialogue" has become a flourishing and multifacetted industry among all kinds of religious actors – clerics and committed lays, religious bodies and individual believers, religious leaders and grass-roots activists – many of whom feel called to contribute to political and social peacemaking, mutual understanding, healing, reconciliation, and justice.

What is "interreligious dialogue"? For the purpose of this paper, let me start with a very broad, preliminary definition:

> *Interreligious dialogue is a non-violent exchange process between adherents of different religions, concerning matters related to relig-*

> *ion*. Religion is the field of social acts, symbols, ideas and institutions that are tying human behavior to transcendental powers.

Conceived in this way, interreligious dialogue may be, indeed, as old as religion itself. Already in antiquity we may find at least four basic ways to cope with religious differences in a non-violent manner:

(1) the first one is, of course, *polytheism*, i.e., the publicly accepted idea that man's fate is decisively influenced by a plurality of gods. Relations between the gods were rarely in harmony – and so were the relations between them and human beings. However, as long as no god claimed to be the one and only truth or reality, rivalries between their worshippers did not necessarily trigger religious war.

(2) The second strategy, "dialogue" in the Socratic-Platonic sense, reflected a growing awareness among intellectual elites of the "axial age" that there were many opinions in society, but, perhaps, only one truth. In the Socratic-Platonic sense, "dialogue" is not really about *toleration* of the Other. It is, rather, a way of intellectual competition usually aiming at proving the *superiority* of a specific world view, in other words, a struggle by means of words and ideas, not by swords and daggers.

(3) The third strategy consisted in relativizing the visible, legal or ritual boundaries between different cults, religions, and philosophies in the name of a higher spiritual knowledge or experience, in which the plurality of gods and cults is said to refer only to different local "names" of (and paths to) the One divine or cosmic reality. This seems to have been the way followed by *mystic* schools, *hermetic* circles, and pagan monotheists – all in all, elite circles who deliberately avoided presenting their views in the public square and took pains to distinguish between an esoteric religion for the intellectual elite and the cults of the masses.

(4) Avoiding public controversy about religious matters was also part of a fourth, but much more pragmatic, strategy, namely, simply living together without dialogue and accepting intellectual inconsistency as a normal part of everyday life. Especially in mixed neighborhoods, popular everyday life would have been impossible without some form of pragmatic 'bricolage', for example, 'overlooking' or temporarily 'forgetting' the otherness of the other, inventing local or individual 'exceptions' from current religious norms, creating local syncretic rituals, or simply focusing on the priority of mutual cooperation and neighborly friendship.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, however, many more strategies have been developed to bring about peace and understanding between adherents of the world's religions. I would like to mention at least five of them.

(1) The first strategy consists in creating a new *universal religion*, such as Theosophy, Neo-Rosicrucianism, Baha'ism, the Ramakrishna Order, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's "Transcendental Meditation", and some branches of modern Sufism. Some of these efforts are indebted to the heritage of ancient mysticism and hermeticism. Some are also influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism.

(2) The second strategy consists in building *multi-religious organizations*, such as the "World's Parliament of Religions" (first convened 1893 in

Chicago and revived in 1993, at the occasion of the first Parliament's 100th anniversary, as the "Parliament of the World's Religions"), the *International Association for Religious Freedom*, founded in 1900; the *World Congress of Faiths* (1936); the *Temple of Understanding* (1960), or the *World Congress of Religions for Peace* (1970). – Most actors involved in these organizations are committed *individual* theologians and lays, not official churches. The main aim usually is to build common ground between the world's religions, the most prominent result being the project of developing a "*Global Ethic*", i.e., to find the smallest common denominator between the religions in their respective *moral* codes. On the intra-monotheist level, there have been increasing efforts to elaborate an "Abrahamic theology" for Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

(3) The third strategy consists in building consultative and confederative structures between official religious bodies, such as the World Council of Churches (1948), the Middle East Council of Churches (1974), the Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the Orient (1991), the conferences of the Patriarchs of the Oriental Orthodox Churches (1998). The main aim of these activities is to improve consultation and cooperation between the member bodies, in some cases also, to achieve a higher degree of theological and liturgical unity.

(4) The fourth strategy comprises interfaith outreach activities by individual religious bodies such as:
- multireligious prayers, such as the Assisi peace prayers established by Pope John Paul II in 1986;
- soul searching activities, for example, asking forgiveness for crimes committed by members of one's own religion, or elaborating in greater detail the peace-promoting dimensions of one's own creed;
- interfaith encounters, such as conferences, workshops, and fact-finding missions;
- interfaith research and education via special institutes, journals, and standing commissions devoted to interreligious dialogue;
- consciousness-raising campaigns like the movement for a "Decade to overcome Violence" (2001-2010) launched by the World Council of Churches.

(5) The fifth strategy consists in building closer and symbiotic relations between religious organizations and state agencies. This is a field of activities that often comes with catch-words like "soft security", "cultural diplomacy", "track-two diplomacy" or "Faith-based diplomacy". It includes, on the one hand, the efforts of political actors and state agencies to use the prestige, networks, and good services of religious leaders for diplomatic purposes, and, on the other hand, the efforts of religious actors to approach political parties and governments with the aim of contributing to peace-building.

Interest in "faith-based diplomacy" arose in the 1980s and 1990s. It has been inspired, inter alia, by the role of religious leaders in effecting a smooth regime change in Poland, East Germany, and the Philippines; by the successes of groups like the Rome-based Communità di San'Egidio in nego-

tiating peace agreements in Third World countries; or the role of religious dignitaries in establishing the so-called Truth-Commissions in South Africa. It is also based on the idea that – when it comes to negotiating armistices and the liberation of hostages in civil war areas – religious leaders enjoy certain comparative advantages. In contrast to official diplomats, for example,

- religious leaders display a certain moral distance towards the temporal powers-that-be;
- they have a long-standing expertise in dealing with humanitarian and charity issues;
- many of them have a "natural" or "professional" pre-disposition for healing or reconciling broken relationships;
- many of them feel spiritually indebted to a theology of peace;
- they have a long-term presence on the ground, often in the remotest village;
- many of them are modest and humble persons, not looking for media attention;
- they are usually part of transnational, global, ecclesiastical networks that may support their activities;
- and, finally, religious organizations are among the largest non-governmental organizations in civil society all over the world.

Faith-based peace activism has also been morally encouraged by the Nobel Peace Price Committee which awarded the Nobel Peace Price to Mother Teresa in 1979, to Bishop Desmond Tutu in 1984, to the Dalai Lama in 1989, to Bishop Carlos Felipe Ximenes Belo and Jose Ramos-Horta in 1996, and to Jimmy Carter in 2002.

Interreligious dialogue: the Middle Eastern dimension

At first sight, there seems to be not much particularly "Middle Eastern" about all these efforts. After all, interreligious dialogue is, by its very nature, *universal* and most academic authorities on "faith-based diplomacy" and "religious peace-making" happen to be US-Americans (Scott Appleby, Marc Gopin, John Paul Lederach, Cynthia Sampson, and Douglas Johnston). Nevertheless, it is obvious that many of the related peace-promoting activities are taking place precisely in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean.

This is not only due to the geo-strategic importance of that region in world politics, but also to the pivotal role of the Middle East and the Levant as cradle and sounding board of the three monotheist world religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – and to the rich heritage of conflicts and contested memorial landscapes it bequeathed to us.

Despite of the large-scale ethno-religious cleansings that have taken place in the 20th century, the region is still shared by adherents of all three monotheist religions.

They are not sharing the region like temporary migrants are sharing life in a global city, but with a deep sense of inherited space and destiny: Middle Eastern monotheisms, despite their universal mission, are deeply rooted in the region's soil. The region's memorial landscapes preserve memories of all three religions, such as tombs, shrines, synagogues, churches, mosques, and ancient battlefields. Many places are highly relevant for the memory of the founding 'origins' of the respective religions. They are the places where the founders dwelled and died, where the decisive initial revelations were received, where the first challenges of the new faith were met, the first martyrs died, and from where millennial redemption is expected to reach the rest of the world.

Some of the sacred places of that region – especially in the Holy Land – are still used or claimed by adherents of all monotheist religions as places of worship and ritual feasts.

In today's age of mass-communication and global TV-coverage, conflicts in this symbolically pivotal region, televised to other parts of the world, may trigger interreligious clashes in geographically completely unrelated parts of the world.

The readiness of religious actors to get involved in political affairs in the Mediterranean is, thus, quite understandable. Since religion is related to space, and space is related to politics, there is no way of escaping the religious dimension of political conflicts.

Religious nationalism and politics: obstacles to interreligious dialogue in the Middle East

Under these circumstances, international interreligious dialogue and faith-based peace activism are bound to face several obstacles that may cause misunderstandings and even disappointment:

First, it is important to note that in Europe, the idea of interreligious "dialogue" may evoke quite different expectations than it does in the Arab world.

In secularized Europe, there seem to be no theological taboos any more. The most fundamental theological issues are easily put up to public consideration. Many participants in ecumenical dialogue activities seem to see the long-term aim of their dialogue in abolishing the doctrinal and ritual walls that separate the denominations and religions, create a great consensus between the religions, or even replace them by a new trans-religious spiritual community. Not surprisingly, it is independent individual writers like Hans Küng or Eugen Drewermann who dominate much of the public discussion in Germany – i.e., writers who do not represent their own churches, but have nevertheless enormous intellectual influence among their rank-and-file.

In a country like Lebanon, where I have done research, "dialogue" has quite a different meaning:

First, the country's religious communities are rather keen on preserving their individuality. They even seem to enjoy their differences. Their univer-

salist claims notwithstanding, many religions are strongly tied to specific national or ethnic groups – a fact that restricts their missionary zeal, but fosters their dogmatic and ritual conservatism. While most of them abstain from converting members of other religions, they are also reluctant to allow theological dissensions among their own rank and file. The public discussion of delicate theological questions is rather discouraged. – Interreligious "*dialogue*", under these circumstances, rather means to demonstrate to the public that different communities can coexist in one country in spite of doctrinal differences and that they can even support a common national cause against foreign influences. Dialogue, in other words, is conceived as the appropriate way to stabilize a *mosaic*.

Second, religious leaders are – more or less – quasi-political figures. Although the Ottoman Millet system has been abolished decades ago, they are still considered to be representatives of their communities and hence, to carry a political responsibility. "Interreligious", or, rather, *inter-communal* dialogue is, hence, not that much about theological issues, than about political and communal ones. Conceived like this, dialogue often requires careful coordination with secular political leaders. For example, when the Alexandria declaration between Jewish, Muslim, and Christian religious leaders was drafted in 2002, the Palestinian clerics, are said to have been constantly on the phone to get Yasir Arafat's consent to almost every sentence of the document.

The realm of Caesar and the realm of God

Giving to God what belongs to God and to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, is a well-established norm of Western Christianity, elaborated in Saint Augustin's distinction between *civitas dei* and *civitas terrena*, Church and State. In principle, this distinction should be expected to *facilitate* interreligious dialogue: the greater the distance of religious bodies to the powers-that-be, the easier it should be for them to find or create common ground in spiritual matters.

In this respect, the closeness of Muslim and Oriental Christian dignitaries to "their" governments and nationalist or communal movements creates serious obstacles to achieve that aim. To give but one example: on January 29, 2001, when the World Council of Churches officially launched its "Decade to Overcome Violence" at the Potsdam Meeting of its Central Committee, the head of the Armenian-Orthodox Church, His Holiness Aram I, Catholicos of Cilicia, publicly stated that he did not endorse violence, but that under certain circumstances and as a last resort, people might have to engage in "limited, controlled" violence to overcome injustice – a declaration that many Western observers considered to contradict the pacifist inspiration of Christianity although it was perfectly understandable in the context of Middle Eastern politics.

Religion in the Middle East, hence, cannot "decouple" itself from the political problems and ties of the region. And this means, among other things, that international support for interreligious dialogue in the Middle East may be a burden as well as an asset:

On the one hand, the merits of international dialogue initiatives cannot be denied: They gave (and give) a voice, an audience, a symbolic visibility, moral encouragement, and (sometimes) resources to peace-loving and open-minded individuals and minorities who have difficulties to be listened to in their own countries and churches. On the other hand, however, they may also be seen as a means to strengthen the influence of hostile outsiders. Middle Eastern Muslims have been deeply traumatized by the political instrumentalization of religious discourse by European colonialism. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, European powers, posing as patrons and protectors of Christian and Jewish minorities in the Middle East, have used religious motives as a pretext for intervening in the internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire. As a result, unctuous declarations about the non-political and purely spiritual and humanitarian mission of Christianity are sure to meet with deep distrust in the Middle East.

The "*First Muslim-Christian Convocation*", held in 1954 at Bhamdoun, Lebanon, for example, is sometimes praised as the first step to Muslim-Christian dialogue in modern history. But a closer look at the proceedings of that conference shows that the project had not organically grown out of inner-*Lebanese* discussions. According to one of its conveners, Dr. Garland Evans Hopkins, a Methodist churchman and vice-president of the "American Friends of the Middle East," the idea to launch the Muslim-Christian convocation was born during a conversation he had with the King of Libya in early 1952. Not surprisingly, the whole undertaking was suspected to be a tool of Anglo-American hegemony. The result: not a single prominent Lebanese cleric attended the conference, and after the Suez Crisis the whole project died.

Today, successful interfaith work in the Eastern Mediterranean has a much more *local* face:

- In Palestine, the PLO developed a veritable local tradition of putting the nation's various religious dignitaries on display during official events, each cleric dressed in his traditional vestments, in order to show that the cause of the nation is supported by all religions and denominations.
- In Lebanon, the National Christian-Muslim Committee for Dialogue, established in 1993, is staffed by official representatives of the seven major denominations, as if it were the prelude to the Senate of spiritual communities recommended in the revised Lebanese Constitution of 1991.
- In Jordan, the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies, established in 1994 under the patronage of former Crown Prince El-Hasan ibn Talal, became a means of emphasizing Jordan's role as a possible mediator between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity in the Arab-Israeli "peace-process".
- Christian oriental churches are eager to show that they are not the puppets of Western powers and work to build their own regional networks, such as the *Middle East Council of Churches*, established in 1974, the Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the Orient, established in 1991, and the congresses of the Catholic patriarchs and bishops of the Orient (since 1999). Since 1998 the Patriarchs of the Orthodox

> Oriental Churches also began to create their own tradition of regular summit meetings.

It remains to be seen whether these modest forms of "localizing" interreligious dialogue will help them to withstand the pressures of international events. With the specter of communist atheism finally removed, Christianity and Islam have lost their unifying enemy. As a result, political competition between the religious communities may increase again and the US war against Iraq might deepen Christian-Muslim-Jewish cleavages on a global scale – a prospect that makes interreligious dialogue an even more urgent task. But, perhaps, the common *enemies* required for such an integrative undertaking are already appearing on the horizon: In Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, established ecclesiastical authorities are threatened by the rise of *violent religious lays* – from Usama Ben Laden to George W. Bush – who are challenging the clergy's monopoly of legitimate religious interpretation; and, finally, the *erosion of all spiritual values* caused by global capitalism may become no less a formidable common enemy to all three monotheist religions than the specter of communism has ever been.