

Today the human race is passing through "a true social and cultural transformation, one which has repercussions on man's religious life as well" (*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 4). People are bewildered by the alarming contradictions which they both cause and endure in modern life. They see wealth and poverty, affluence and misery, power and weakness, boldness and resignation, freedom and subjugation, knowledge and ignorance, technological progress and underdevelopment, health and sickness, life and death. These are some of the more flagrant imbalances that afflict the modern world and that distort all relationships between nations, communities and individuals.

All believers of Islam, Christianity and Judaism should join people of good will of whatever religion or ideology to furnish concrete responses, including a common message and coordinated action, to the human situation. The fundamental problems are the same for all communities, and believers must provide solutions, both by act and by word, as their faith in God and their love for humanity guide them. "What is man? What is this sense of sorrow, of evil, of death, which continues to exist despite so much progress? What is the purpose of these victories, purchased at so high a cost? What can man offer to society, what can he expect from it? What follows this earthly life?" (*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 10).

I
THE FULFILLMENT OF CREATION

Those of monotheistic faith, such as Muslims, Jews and Christians, believe that the world is the result, not of chance or of necessity, but of a marvelous plan of which only God knows the secret, since he is both the initiator of it and the one who will bring it to completion. Believers especially, then, should do what they can to help the world to prosper and to progress toward perfect conformity to that for which God created it. They are called to this by God, who in his sovereign love has chosen to enlist the cooperation of human beings. As a sign of this noble calling humanity

reflects in miniature, as it were, both the magnitude of the world and its minuteness. Christians know that "the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now" (Romans 8:19-22). And from their side, Muslims remember that God "hath made serviceable unto you whatsoever is in the skies and whatsoever is in the earth" (Qur'an 31:20), and, further, God "hath made of service unto you the rivers; and maketh the sun and the moon, constant in their courses, to be of service unto you, and hath made of service unto you the night and the day. And He giveth you of all ye ask of Him" (Qur'an 14:32-34). So it is in the name of God, whose creation of delicate and vital balance foreshadows a higher universal harmony, that believers are called upon to play an effective role in the eventual consummation of the world. It is by participating in this "completion of creation" that all prepare for the revelation of "a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21:1).

A new quest is needed for relationships of respect, obedience and flexibility between humankind and nature, to replace those of pollution, violence and subjection. These would in turn lead to new relationships between technology and nature, so that the irreversible processes of urbanization, industrialization and mass consumption might be tempered by a control over human appetites and a respect for nature, from whence come the material benefits of the earth. Is it necessarily utopian to imagine that technology might adopt a human face and learn to unite what is beautiful with that which is true and good? Art and culture have always had something to say in the fulfillment of creation, and all civilizations, however primitive, have demonstrated this. God in His wisdom challenges men and women of faith to act responsibly in this respect, so that their influence in the world will reflect the ideals of brotherhood which they seek to see exemplified in society.

II
SERVICE TO HUMANKIND

"According to the almost unanimous opinion of believers and unbelievers alike, all things on earth should be related to man as their center and crown" (*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 12). Christians and Muslims affirm the eminent dignity of humanity. This is what constrains them to respect all human beings, defend their rights and render them service.

1. What Is the Origin of Human Dignity?

According to the Islamic view human beings possess an exceptional quality within the created world. The Qur'an affirms that God "formed them (human beings) harmoniously" and breathed into them of his spirit (Qur'an 15:29, rendition by translator), making them his "viceroys (*khalifa*) in the earth," even though they would "do harm therein and . . . shed blood" (Qur'an 2:30). A "trust" (*amana*) was committed to them, a responsibility from which "the heavens and the earth and the hills" turned away (Qur'an 33:72). So, it is said that humans have been "challenged" (*mukhattab*), made responsible (*mukallaf*) by God for all things. This is no doubt why in the Qur'an it is said that the angels bowed down before Adam. There is a prophetic hadith that says, "God created Adam in His image."¹

For its part, the Christian tradition has developed to a high degree the biblical teaching that "man was created 'to the image of God,' is capable of knowing and loving his Creator, and was appointed by Him as master of all earthly creatures that he might subdue them and use them to God's glory" (*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 12). Subsequently Jesus Christ revealed to men and women the extraordinary dignity that they have in being children adopted by the Father in the name and image of the one who is for all time the Perfect Son. "The Christian man, conformed to the likeness of that Son who is the firstborn of many brothers, receives 'the first-fruits of the Spirit' (Romans 8:23) by which he becomes capable of discharging the new law of love," since "Christ has risen . . . He has lavished life upon us so that, as sons in the Son, we can cry out in the Spirit: Abba, Father!" (*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 22).

Because all human beings share in that high dignity, either in reality or in hope, they have the right to be respected, served and loved. Christians and Muslims are obliged, then, to render service to all people, both collectively and individually, according to their particular needs, since "man . . . is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself" (*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 24). Such is the human being whom all believers are called upon to serve, "man as 'willed' by God, as 'chosen' by him from eternity and called, destined for grace and glory—this is 'each' man, 'the most concrete' man, 'the most real'; this is man in all the fullness of the mystery in which he has become a sharer in Jesus Christ, the mystery in which each one of the four thousand million human beings living on our planet has become a sharer from the moment he is conceived beneath the heart of his mother" (*Redemptor Hominis*, No. 13).

2. How Human Dignity May Best Be Promoted

First of all there is the *dignity of life*, demonstrated by the respect shown to motherhood and the rejection of abortion, by a balanced view of the bodily desires with recognition of their spiritual significance, by the meticulous care taken in treating the sick with absolute respect for the biological functions of their bodies, by persistent efforts to rehabilitate or treat the physically and mentally handicapped, by the warm and intelligent support given to the dying and the courageous refusal of all forms of euthanasia.

Another aspect of human nobility is the *dignity of the spirit*. "Man judges rightly that by his intellect he surpasses the material universe, for he shares in the light of the divine mind" (*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 15). Thus human beings are capable of grasping empirical truths, discovering spiritual realities and exercising wisdom. Respect for the dignity of human intelligence calls for the provision of adequate means for universal education in order that everyone might have access to all forms of culture. Believers judge that such provision results from the action of the Spirit of God. Modern pluralistic societies and the framework of international cultural exchanges provide unusual opportunities for cooperation in intellectual development.

Likewise human grandeur is expressed in the *dignity of the conscience*, understood both psychologically and morally. That is why believers strive to ensure that as material and technical progress takes place it is accompanied by moral and spiritual development. Is the life of modern human beings serving more and more to enhance the dignity of human personality? Are the demands of the conscience becoming clearer, nobler and higher, or are we witnessing a moral regression under the influence of new technology and unbridled mass consumption? Religious faith enables us to emphasize the objective norms of morality that are ultimately grounded in the loving good will of God toward humankind and the world. We can affirm the right of every conscience, even if misguided, to be respected, then enlightened and brought to true freedom.

The mystery of the human conscience leads, then, to the *dignity of freedom*. "This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that in matters religious no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs. Nor is anyone to be restrained from acting in accordance with his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits" (*Dignitatis*

Humanae, No. 2). Believers know by experience that the wise exercise of freedom requires appropriate education along with certain sociological and legal safeguards. So there ought to be a concerted effort to make possible such education and safeguards in any situation where freedom is threatened.

Within their respective national societies and by means of international organizations, believers can manifest their will to cooperate in humanitarian service, without regard to religious or ideological affiliation. Organizations such as the UNO, the UNESCO, the FAO, the BIT, the OMS, the UNICEF, etc., should be able to count on the active support of all men and women of faith, so that the inalienable rights of humankind might be protected throughout the world. In addition Christians and Muslims have developed particular programs of aid, showing their impartial good will to help those in need. Quite a few Christian and humanitarian groups have been joined by Muslims who desire to do their part in the works of social welfare, relief and education that have been undertaken. Of course both parties in such cooperation need to respect each other's particular religious motivations, but together they can, through serving others, advance their dialogue regarding the spiritual values which already unite them, and share together the sublime vision of human grandeur that inspires them.

3. Who Is Most Deserving of Service?

It is by service to the most deprived that believers can best testify to their respect for human dignity. The faith that motivates their acts is most clearly seen in the zeal with which they seek to help and deliver the oppressed (*mustad'afin*) from their burdens, comfort and teach the orphans and the handicapped, and treat the lepers and mentally ill. The true extent of their love for humanity is proven by the degree to which they show kindness for the marginalized of society, affection for the elderly, and tenderness toward the dying. Even atheists are not excluded from this human concern, for their dignity is fully recognized, even though their denial of God involves certain serious possibilities for undermining human dignity and for disturbing the peace of the world. By suggesting to atheists that every person is a "path toward God" believers may best be able to show that humanity is "a reflection of God, the highest manifestation of visible creation," rendering glory to the One who formed it.

Christians and Muslims should cooperate in showing basic respect and a helpful spirit toward the masses of those in whose favor the Beatitudes speak: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of

heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:1-10). For their part, Muslims are ever mindful of the Qur'an which requires that they put into practice their own ideals of justice and mercy: "And serve Allah. Ascribe nothing as partner unto Him. (Show) kindness unto parents, and unto near kindred, and orphans, and the needy, and unto the neighbour who is not of kin, and the fellow-traveller and the wayfarer and (the slaves) whom your right hands possess" (4:36). All those, then, who go back to Abraham in their religious traditions can together join with all who hold to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, calling attention to the fact that the people who should be given first priority in the defense of those rights are the ones who have been long deprived of them and whose cries of distress continually rise to God.

HUMAN IMITATION OF DIVINE ACTION

The basic human cooperation described above constitutes the permanent setting for dialogue between believers as they are involved with and by side with all persons of good will, even with those who are without faith. Whether it involves worldwide development, service to fellow human beings or the organization of society, partners in dialogue have a great deal to say and to do together. As important representatives of the total human experience, they all need to be a permanent part of such cooperation.

Their motivation for such an involvement in service to humanity is of course their faith in God and their sense of closeness to him. By their action in society believers manifest in part their true identity to others, since what they do is intimately linked with the very action of God in the world.

Christians are challenged by the high ideal set for them by Jesus Christ: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. . . . You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:44-45, 48). And Muslims are told, according to the words of Al-Ghazali: "Clothe yourselves in the ways of God. For believers, perfection lies in a relationship with God wherein His most praiseworthy attributes are taken on, such as knowledge, justice, goodness, kindness, beneficence, mercy, good counsel, encouragement to do good and protection from all evil."² Thus by their deeds Muslims arrive at what may be called "an exchange of attributes," something described in a beautiful "divine hadith" (*hadith qudsi*): "The closer my servants draw to me through voluntary good deeds, the more I love them, says God. And when I love them I am the ear with which they hear, the eye with which they see and the tongue with which they speak."

Thus by their joint action Christians and Muslims have the opportunity to render a fresh witness to the reality of God Himself, showing to all that in the midst of the human struggle for fulfillment there is possible an orientation toward the divine mystery. When believers "vie with one another in good works" by serving young people, children, the handicapped, and the sick and dying, by denouncing war and all murderous experimentation, they do so because they consider life to be a gift of God and because they believe in the living God who loves life and who desires to see life come to full fruition. When they struggle against all forms of discrimination (sexual, racial, cultural, religious or national) and against the selfish appropriation of natural resources by individuals or collectivities so as to guarantee justice and equality of opportunity for everyone, they do so because they regard the riches of the earth as gifts from God and because they believe in a just and generous God who creates with largesse and gives without measure.

When believers seek to defend freedom in all its aspects so that humans will recognize and accept their personal responsibility before their own conscience, before their fellow human beings and before God, they do so because, to them, freedom is a gift of God, and because they believe in a God who is free "to do what He wills" in love for all humankind and in view of eliciting their free response to Him. When believers promote

dialogue as a means of resolving conflicts and when they work to build a more harmonious and inclusive society, both regionally and internationally, they do so because, to them, peace and unity within diversity are gifts of God, and because they believe in a merciful and compassionate God who forgives and unites, who never despairs even of the people who are the most resistant to His will. Therefore, the concerted action of Christians and Muslims makes it possible for them to give united witness today to the eminent value of this world, to the true dignity of human beings, and to the unique greatness of God. And, further, their specific cooperation in these various types of essential societal endeavor may be considered as a kind of human imitation of God's working, and as at least a partial revelation to the world of the divine activity.

Notes

1. Many Islamic scholars interpret this text as meaning that God created Adam according to the image that He had previously conceived Him to have. Others, such as Al-Ghazali, think that Adam was made to resemble God Himself, and that it is because of this particularity that God chose him as His "viceroys" on the earth.

2. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Jhya'ulum al-din (The Revival of Religious Sciences)*, Cairo: Al-Babi al-Halabi, 1358/1939, p. 298. This question is treated by Al-Ghazali under what he calls the fifth cause of love for God, that is, "resemblance, or conformity, since that which is similar to something else is attracted to it, and is more inclined to take on the very form of the object of attraction."

Christian-Muslim dialogue should be seen as one of the principal dimensions of life for men and women of faith in those many countries where believers in the two religions live, work, love, suffer and die together. No doubt many Christians in such circumstances choose to be indifferent, leaving the two communities to their respective customs, prejudices and integrity. However history has shown that such an attitude keeps each party involved in ignorance of the other and encourages all the more misunderstanding, suspicion and conflict. Some Christians today show a particular interest in the historical aspects of Islam, but at the risk of misunderstanding its religious dimensions, those features that make it possible for those who belong to Islam to experience God and to give witness of their faith. The dialogue proposed is meant to take place on the level of the human spiritual adventure, and, in this book, the point of view is specifically Christian. We all realize, of course, that Islam, for its part, has a double aim, in that it is both a plan for the everyday life of society and a plan for human religious experience. By taking the first plan into account we have tried to assess here the likelihood and the limits of dialogue today in terms of the second plan, that is, a "religious dialogue" between Christians and Muslims.

Having begun in the Middle East and around the Mediterranean basin this dialogue has spread to all continents. This fact increases its chances for success since Christians and Muslims find themselves in a great variety of national and ideological situations, in ever-changing political and economic contexts. They are never alone, just the two of them, and they often find themselves confronted, sometimes in the company of their Jewish friends, by the impressive religious development of non-monotheistic believers, as is the case in Asia. In addition the world of technology and the evolution of modernity challenge Muslims and Christians to renew the expressions of their faith and to rethink the terms of their dialogue. Taking account as it does of all human and religious factors, the dialogue enjoys almost unlimited possibilities as to place, time, manner and procedure. So, believers in the two religions can hope to develop a true exchange that will be marked by acceptance of one another, mutual understanding of the two faiths, sharing of experiences and taking initiatives under the guidance of the Spirit. Requiring first of all the

acceptance by its partners of the divine requirements for such a discipline, the way of dialogue leads quite naturally into the mystery of the human personality and its free response to the call of the Lord. Dialogue can never be simply an end in itself, for it remains at the disposal of God to serve the cause of fuller conciliation between believers.

Such an enterprise requires that each person recognize the values of the other. This means that Christians and Muslims must overcome the ignorance of the past, forget the injustices of other times, and renew their knowledge and appreciation of one another. Only after such a renewal of knowledge about and esteem for Muslims can Christians undertake a theological evaluation of Islam in the light of the Gospel, regarding it as a monotheistic and prophetic religion having ties—not yet well defined—with the Judeo-Christian tradition, and as a faith in which the Abraham model of faith and submission to God is upheld in all of its implications.

At the same time Christians and Muslims must face realistically, in faith, the obstacles that stand in their way: a history of fourteen centuries during which polemics and conflicts have often prevailed over mutual understanding and cooperation, so that the attitudes of the communities confronting each other are marked by instinctive distrust and prejudice. The only way to eliminate such attitudes is to persevere in imparting accurate information and practicing greater love for one another. From their side, Christians will repudiate the often unjustified accusations that ignorant people make so easily against Islam. And they will seek to know better exactly what Muslims think about Christians, their Scriptures, their mysteries, their monotheism, their Church and their efforts to be faithful to the message of Jesus. We need to be aware that there are limits to dialogue so that we might avoid setbacks in relationships with one another. But it is especially in projects of common action that Christians and Muslims will give evidence of their reconciliation, as they cooperate in programs based on values held in common with one another and equally, more or less, with other people of good will. In all situations human collaboration is necessary.

Then, beyond this action together, dialogue between Christians and Muslims must consider seriously what religious convergence is possible. It would be a pity if the encounter and sharing of the two parties should be limited in scope to the temporal values of this world. Higher values are involved in the spiritual quests of believers, and when they take these into account they discover that they have much to share with each other on the level of their respective religious experiences. By participating in this sharing the faith of the partners is purified and deepened. Christians and Muslims find themselves oriented toward a kind of spiritual emulation which can only draw them closer to each other. As they articulate their

parallel and distinct ways of faithfulness to the religious traditions from which they draw their life, there is nothing to prevent them from entering into a common hope, that of seeing God enlighten them concerning whatever spiritual enrichment is possible for them, in expectation of the time when finally he will inform them of that wherein they differ (Qur'an 5:48).

As they make their way together Christians and Muslims should develop their dialogue on the four levels necessary for human communication. First there is the generous sharing as brothers and sisters, which is a dialogue of hearts. Next is the dialogue of life, requiring the courage to expend themselves in the promotion of human values, of which God alone is the final guarantee. In the dialogue of speech the partners dare to make discourse on both God and humankind. And finally there is the resolute dialogue of silence in which God speaks directly to the heart of each of the partners. Truly it is in silence that real dialogue begins and ends, since it is in the silence of faith that each one can catch a glimpse of the eternal destiny of the other.

Christians, from their side, feel called by Jesus Christ to extend in the present time His work as mediator, the one who reconciles those who are far away with those who are near. As their Master, they know that they must take the first steps and accept in their prayer and in their heart "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, [whatever] is [of] any excellence, [whatever] is . . . worthy of praise" (Philippians 4:8). In their per-