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Religions for Peace 

Promoting Just and Harmonious Societies



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Religions for Peace

Religions for Peace is the largest international coalition bringing together representatives of the world's religious communities who are dedicated to achieving peace. It is a non-sectarian, non-political international organization that is accredited to the United Nations. *Religions for Peace* has national and regional affiliates in 90 countries and Women of Faith and Interfaith Youth Networks at the global, regional, and national levels. It takes an inter-religious approach to mobilizing the tremendous potential of religious communities, emphasizing how collaboration and coordination among faith groups enhances their overall impact and ability to contribute to peace and development.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Religions for Peace (RfP) would like to express gratitude and appreciation to the German Government for their generous support that enabled *RfP* to develop this paper.

RfP would also like to thank all of its affiliates and staff, as well as external civil society and faith based actors who provided valuable feedback. A special appreciation goes to Dr. Katherine Marshall, author of this paper, for her partnership in this endeavor.

**CARING FOR OUR
COMMON FUTURE BY**

Promoting Just and Harmonious Societies

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World Faiths Development Dialogue*

CONTENTS

Executive summary	2
1 Challenges and questions: Inter-religious paths towards just and harmonious societies	4
2 Good governance and security	8
3 Social cohesion, migration, and integration	12
4 Freedom of religion and belief and religious minorities	15
5 Challenges represented by social and cultural violence	18
6 Peace education	22
7 Challenges for multi-religious action: Religious assets	23
8 Guiding questions for engaging Commission discussion on the topic	25
9 Concluding comments.....	26
Bibliography, resources for further information	27
Endnotes.....	30

Executive summary

The shared ideal of just, harmonious, and diverse societies can be attained, but polarized ideas and communities, rapid change, and inequities that accompany globalization pose serious threats.

Wide-ranging challenges call for active inter-religious engagement to understand and address critical topics that divide societies.

Understanding how polarization and weakening trust in institutions affects religious communities is the foundation for constructive interreligious action. Religious voices belong at the table in decision-making circles, but they are too little heard in global governance institutions. That can and should change. Identities and convictions can create or deepen rifts, but the ethos and experience of interreligious bodies open countless opportunities to play uniting and healing roles. This is true from the most global to the most local and personal levels. The path forward can build on *Religions for Peace* Assembly ideals of “shared security” and “robust principled pluralism,” bolstered by a sharper focus on governance challenges, appreciation for the linked challenges of the “Five Ps” of sustainable development (peace, people, planet, prosperity, and partnerships), and a constant focus on those left behind.

The *Religions for Peace* Commission on Just and Harmonious Societies will focus on the following challenges and questions:

TOPIC OF FOCUS	CENTRAL CHALLENGES	PROMISING APPROACHES	PATHS FORWARD
GOOD GOVERNANCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Loss of trust in institutions ■ Embedded corruption ■ Painful transitions of government ■ Abuses of power that especially affect women 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Speaking truth to power ■ Capacity building ■ Election monitoring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Expand anti-corruption initiatives ■ Focus on supporting positive government transitions ■ Purposefully address domestic violence and other abuses of women
SECURITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Weaknesses in rule of law ■ Gangs and crime ■ Devastating impact on the most vulnerable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Engaging youth and women’s programs ■ Analyses of aspirations and grievances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Help to revamp Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) frameworks
MIGRATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Tensions facing migrants in sending and receiving countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Direct support to migrants ■ Advocacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Pursue dialogue on new UN compacts
REFUGEES AND DISPLACED POPULATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Large populations affected by conflicts ■ Humanitarian crises ■ Tensions around third-country resettlement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Direct humanitarian support ■ Focus on education ■ Advocacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Advocacy for longer-term solutions to protracted refugee situations ■ Dialogue on compact implementation

FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND BELIEF (FoRB)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Different understandings of FoRB focus and priorities ■ Violations of FoRB ■ Divisions between human rights and FoRB advocates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Common support for FoRB in situations of violations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Safe space discussions on sensitive topics, for example, proselytizing guidelines ■ Common action to address critical situations
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL VIOLENCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Hostilities to minority religious communities ■ Tensions around specific groups (including their traditions, family law and other aspects) ■ Social media fostering hate speech 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Advocacy ■ Support for community understanding ■ Addressing social media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Map successful national dialogues ■ Support truth and reconciliation commissions ■ Expand action on hate speech
PEACE EDUCATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Religious roles in Sustainable Development Goals education unclear ■ Need for religious literacy ■ Need to educate for conflict resolution and cultures of peace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ethics education ■ Workshops ■ Cultural approaches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Share promising approaches and curricula ■ Build on cultural activities

Religious actors **can and must work across sectors**, marshalling their varied and powerful assets, to build fair and efficient governance systems that **respect human rights and promote robust forms of pluralism**. Different religious communities need to diagnose opportunities and ills and strengthen their approaches to partnership and action. Overcoming tendencies towards siloes among religious communities and with other sectors, listening to others, working to bring forward the best experience and ideas, and reaching out to many within religious communities (women and young people are leading examples) who traditionally sat at the margins, are all vital steps forward.

Contemporary realities demand approaches that combine senior leadership (“**fire from above**”) with action at the local and community level (“**fire from below**”). Religious communities are called to work in complex partnerships, not only with other religious communities but with wide-ranging sectors: public and private; global, national, and local. They can and must look to **religious assets that include spiritual and ethical teachings and practical on-the-ground positions within trusted communities**. Assets include distinctive opportunities to appreciate grievances and hopes that fuel tensions, and to advance authentic, creative, and practical dialogues for action. Traditions and approaches that elicit and act on compassion and heal trauma, the ancient gifts of religious communities, have never been so sorely needed.

The Commission needs to focus on practical dimensions of governance. Security concerns for many communities call for a revamped understanding of how to counter extremism and to support democratic values and institutions, with a deep appreciation for core human rights values that focus on equality of dignity, opportunity, and recognition. The aim is to bring forward the best of religious ethics and experience, to achieve social justice. Working across different sectors and institutions, inter-religious action has real potential to heal divides and achieve humanity’s potential for equitable, diverse, thriving, and peaceful societies.

1 Challenges and questions: Inter-religious paths towards just and harmonious societies

The shared ideal of just, harmonious, and diverse societies is attainable. However, polarized ideas and communities and the rapid changes and inequities that accompany globalization stand in the way. To respond and contribute with their formidable assets, religious actors can and must work across sectors to build fair and efficient governance systems that respect human rights and promote robust forms of pluralism. The central question is how to make that happen.

Religious voices belong at the table in decision-making circles at this time of challenges and crises of purpose and direction. Voices of religious communities are present but too little heard in global governance institutions, which play central parts in the era's most fundamental challenges. That can and should change. It will, however, happen only with concerted efforts by different religious communities to diagnose opportunities and ills and to strengthen their approaches to partnership and action. The question is where and how to achieve these ends.

Bringing religious voices to the decision-making table means overcoming tendencies towards siloes within and among religious communities and with other sectors. It means listening to others and working to bring forward the best experience and ideas. It means reaching out to many within religious communities (women and young people are leading examples) who traditionally sat at the margins. And it means working with approaches that combine senior leadership ("fire from above") with action at the local and community level ("fire from below").

The chart below summarizes challenges and questions that are the focus of the *Religions for Peace (RfP)* Commission on Just and Harmonious Societies:

TOPIC OF FOCUS	CENTRAL CHALLENGES	PROMISING APPROACHES	PATHS FORWARD
GOOD GOVERNANCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Loss of trust in institutions ■ Embedded corruption ■ Painful transitions of government ■ Abuses of power that especially affect women 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Speaking truth to power ■ Capacity building ■ Election monitoring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Expand anti-corruption initiatives ■ Focus on supporting positive government transitions ■ Purposefully address domestic violence and other abuses of women
SECURITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Weaknesses in rule of law ■ Gangs and crime ■ Devastating impact on the most vulnerable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Engaging youth and women's programs ■ Analyses of aspirations and grievances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Help to revamp Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) frameworks
MIGRATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Tensions facing migrants in sending and receiving countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Direct support to migrants ■ Advocacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Pursue dialogue on new UN compacts

REFUGEES AND DISPLACED POPULATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Large populations affected by conflicts Humanitarian crises Tensions around third-country resettlement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Direct humanitarian support Focus on education Advocacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advocacy for longer-term solutions to protracted refugee situations Dialogue on compact implementation
FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND BELIEF (FoRB)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Different understandings of FoRB focus and priorities Violations of FoRB Divisions between human rights and FoRB advocates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Common support for FoRB in situations of violations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Safe space discussions on sensitive topics, for example, proselytizing guidelines Common action to address critical situations
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL VIOLENCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hostilities to minority religious communities Tensions around specific groups (including their traditions, family law and other aspects) Social media fostering hate speech 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advocacy Support for community understanding Addressing social media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Map successful national dialogues Support truth and reconciliation commissions Expand action on hate speech
PEACE EDUCATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Religious roles in Sustainable Development Goals education unclear Need for religious literacy Need to educate for conflict resolution and cultures of peace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ethics education Workshops Cultural approaches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share promising approaches and curricula Build on cultural activities

FRAMING THE CHALLENGES: THE SETTING

The core challenge arises from the polarized ideas and divided communities that are features of societies across different regions and social and economic systems. A widespread and worrying erosion of trust in social and political institutions accentuates tensions and divisions. Both trends reflect but also aggravate the inequalities and inequities that are integral facets of globalization, linked to technological advances and the unrelenting pace of change in modern societies.

Religious communities are deeply affected by these trends. Their focus on identities and convictions as to the proper path to follow can create or deepen rifts, but their ethos and experience also offer opportunities to play uniting and healing roles. Multi-religious actors are challenged to highlight and apply the deeply ethical values that represent the core of religious teachings to world affairs, in situations that range from the most global to the most local and personal levels. The 2013 *RfP* Commission on Just and Harmonious Societies argued that religious communities can and must promote a “robust principled pluralism that yields courteous candor and genuine mutual respect.” That ideal and goal remains valid and central.

All world regions and communities confront a sharp and ironic duality. There is incontestable progress, like advances in life expectancy, rising education levels, instant communication and ready movement, and expectations of equality among all human beings. Previous generations could only imagine the opportunities

that today promise to transform lives and unlock their potential. But negative forces are also at work: bitter conflicts and human suffering are linked to political and social processes that accentuate differences and curtail opportunity. Vast inequalities are starkly visible. The very benefits of materialism and mobility undermine traditional cultures and challenge social cohesion. Symptoms of malaise include ascendant populism, the rise of strongmen, and various forms of extremism. All threaten human rights, social harmony, and human welfare.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that United Nations member nations endorsed in September 2015 articulate a common vision and architecture for action. The overarching framework highlights the complex linkages among seemingly different objectives, characterized as “Five Ps”: peace, prosperity, people, planet, and partnerships. Grasping the interrelationships among them is central to bridging divides and bringing together what have been segmented sectors and intellectual frameworks. Spiritual approaches similarly cross sectoral boundaries and link them, within the ideal framework of social harmony and justice.

THE ESSENTIALS OF INTER-RELIGIOUS APPROACHES

Religious communities are called to work in complex partnerships, not only with other religious communities but with wide-ranging sectors: public and private; global, national, and local. They can and must draw on religious assets that include both spiritual and ethical teachings and practical on-the-ground positions within trusted communities. Assets include distinctive opportunities to appreciate grievances and hopes that fuel tensions, and to advance authentic, creative, and practical dialogues for action. Traditions and approaches that elicit and act on compassion and heal trauma, ancient gifts of religious communities, have never been so sorely needed.

Forms and roles of interreligious, intrareligious, and religious/non-religious engagement and dialogue have evolved since the 2013 *Religions for Peace* Assembly. Widely different forums and networks are at work today, some allied with the United Nations system but many focused also on a multitude of different institutions (multilateral banks, regional entities, G7/8, G20, business, and educational organs) and topics (environment, water, women, children, food). This diverse experience—some that is notable for its wisdom and effectiveness, some whose impact is more tenuous—highlights the large and often untapped potential to contribute to new forms of partnerships.

This Commission needs to focus on practical dimensions of governance, with a view to bringing forward the best of religious ethics and experience. That means addressing issues that range from sharpening understandings of social justice to easing social tensions around freedom of religion and belief. The primacy of security concerns for many communities calls for a revamped understanding of how to counter both extremism and violence and to support democratic values and institutions. This must happen within a context of deep appreciation for core human rights values that focus on equality of dignity, opportunity, and recognition. Religious approaches need to engage and confront underlying doubts about democratic systems, shifting ideals for identity within plural societies, and the complex and changing roles of women, youth, and minority communities. Restoring faith in institutions by delivering on promises with integrity and good governance can start with religious institutions themselves and extend beyond.

FOCUSING ON THOSE LEFT BEHIND

A shared focus on those left behind, on the vulnerable among us, is a driver to action for religious communities. Healing divided societies and restoring trust demands first and foremost an unwavering focus on social justice. Religious communities thus have important opportunities to promote just and harmonious societies.

The Commission opens opportunities to define and trace new paths towards translating ideals of rights, justice, and harmony into reality.

2 Good governance and security

Decent, efficient government, security for all citizens, and rule of law have risen higher on lists of global priorities in recent years. Surveys and consultations with diverse communities highlight the importance that people attach to safety and to good and honest governance.¹ Good governance is intrinsically linked to the democratic values of participation and service.

Traditional governance models and even the fundamental values involved are, however, challenged by numerous factors. Complex, dynamic, and interconnected societies demand new thinking and, at the same time, a revitalization of core underlying values. A harsh act or word in one place ricochets instantly across boundaries so tensions cannot be contained within a community or nation.² Trust in institutions, many surveys indicate, is weak.³ Misunderstandings and deliberate manipulation compete with the powerful data systems that allow great insights into social phenomena. In this relentlessly fast-paced world, driven by strong competitive forces, some thrive and advance but many are left behind; a vertigo that results from constant change often translates into identity politics and instability.⁴

It is poor citizens who experience the most brutal effects of weaknesses in governance and institutions. Five areas call for special attention and action. *Gender-based violence* is the largest category; one in five women in poorer communities are thought to be a victim of rape or attempted rape. *Different forms of slavery or forced labor* involve people forced to work, whether in brick kilns, fishing boats, or rice fields. *Police and other state abuses of power* are widespread and result in failures of justice. *Property grabbing, or the violent theft of land*, is a rising concern. In definitions of modern forms of slavery, *forced marriage* has special importance. The challenges facing women are also exemplified where widows are vulnerable because cultures in many countries do not allow women to own property. Advocate Gary Haugen argues that: “The problem for the poor...is that...laws are rarely enforced. Without functioning public justice systems to deliver the protections of the law to the poor, the legal reforms of the modern human rights movement rarely improve the lives of those who need them most.”⁵

Religious approaches and engagement have important parts to play in addressing these complex problems. Their broad mission is to do so within frameworks that respect both human rights and a positive pluralism in today’s complex, modernizing societies. Both actual and potential approaches vary widely, as religious institutions play very different roles in different situations, for example in political organizations and in setting and applying the rules of the game for participation in partisan politics as well as in defining and managing legal systems. Where the framework of governance involves principles of secularism, understandings and arrangements on religious roles differ markedly from country to country. Thus the capacity of individual religious entities and of multi-religious bodies to contribute constructively to addressing widespread failures of governance differs, as do feasible and desirable actions.

Of special interest to the Commission are efforts that focus on the rights of poor and vulnerable communities, whether as direct actors in applying the law (especially where religious family law is involved) or as advocates for justice. Two examples of religious engagement are bold reforms of family law to strengthen women’s rights (the *Moudawana* in Morocco, for example⁶) and on modern slavery.⁷ Another vital field is active religious involvement in forms of national dialogue that aim to redefine broad understandings of governance

principles and social compacts. A current example is the effort to advance a national dialogue in Uganda.⁸ Many look to South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s leadership for inspiration.⁹ Truth and reconciliation commissions in different world regions have sought to address painful periods of conflict and tension. Reinforcing positive norms is an essential area where strong inter-religious action is needed and can show results.

Eight questions, discussed in more detail below, point to potential areas for action:

GOVERNANCE CHALLENGE	QUESTIONS FOR INTER-RELIGIOUS ACTORS
Tensions at times of transition, including elections and post conflict	What roles can religious institutions play in assuring peaceful transitions towards more harmonious societies?
Extremist politics and movements challenge peaceful and democratic societies	How can religious communities help positively reshape narratives that are leading to negative forms of extremism?
Widespread corruption as a leading issue	How can religious communities engage more effectively in combatting corrupt practices at different levels?
Narrowing of space for civil society actors to engage with government	What might shift trends towards a narrowing of civil society space?
Weaknesses in service delivery	How can religious communities build on service delivery roles as partners in the SDG framework?
Persistent challenges in fragile and conflict states	How can inter-religious entities best contribute to global dialogue on better approaches in fragile and conflict state situations?
Stateless populations face grave challenges	What roles could <i>Religions for Peace</i> play in looking towards solutions?
Challenges facing vulnerable communities	What multi-religious actions might focus on the most vulnerable communities, for example victims of modern slavery, child marriage, and persecution linked to identities such as LGBTQ?

- **Action during critical times of transition.** Tensions and violence are common features of transitions, whether around elections or at other times, but they also offer opportunities to redefine social and political relationships. Religious actors (both specific traditions and interreligious actors) have played vital roles in transitional periods—including, but not confined to, post-conflict situations. Democratic elections and other points where there is a change in party rule or where new regimes take office have emerged as times when violence can flare (Kenya 2007-8, for example). They can also serve as a clean slate, a fresh start. What are successful and less successful examples of religious engagement in the design of fair elections, in monitoring processes, and in post-transition periods? What positive examples can be highlighted of inter-religious focus on agendas for new governments and administrations, periods where there are especially productive opportunities for creative and forward-looking thinking and dialogue? Are there examples of religious engagement to combat instances where populist forces highlight religious, ethnic, and racial divides? The experience with religious engagement in national dialogues and truth and reconciliation processes is rich and diverse. Are there especially good models and lessons to be learned?

- **Reshaping narratives on “Countering Violent Extremism (CVE).”** The sharp focus in analysis and policy approaches on frameworks termed CVE has negative consequences. These include inserting security policies and objectives with the delivery of development programs and diplomacy and a highly over-simplified focus on religious aspects of both extremism and violence.¹⁰ The tendency to focus on extremist tendencies within Islam casts a shadow across Muslim communities worldwide.¹¹ *Religions for Peace* can be a leading voice in highlighting the pitfalls of over-simplified CVE approaches, at the same time illuminating analyses of diverse patterns of radicalization and associated action (Search for Common Ground,¹² International Center on Religion and Diplomacy (IRCRD),¹³ Ahmed Abaddi and the Rabita Mohammediya,¹⁴ Institute for Security Studies (ISS),¹⁵ and Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism (BRAVE) in Kenya,¹⁶ for example). Various probing analyses underscore the hopes and grievances contributing to different radical ideologies and movements. Acknowledging and addressing factors within traditions that contribute to polarizing and extremist views points towards further areas for action.
- **Religious roles in combatting corrupt practices and embedded corruption.**¹⁷ Actual and perceived corruption (misuse of public resources for private gain) undermines faith in governments and other institutions worldwide, fueling tendencies both towards populism and extremism. The challenges are ethical and practical, linked both to social and political values and to standards and approaches to governance. Important tools are now available to combat corrupt practices, and global integrity alliances—notably Transparency International and the International Anti-Corruption Conference (IACC)—address the topic from multiple directions. An important question is how religious communities can engage more actively in efforts towards honest governance. Examples of courageous instances of “speaking truth to power” where poor governance erodes public trust and specific examples of good practices can underscore the potential for deliberate roles in addressing the problem.¹⁸ Advocacy and support to communities threatened by extractive industries and establishing standards of internal management for religious institutions are promising examples.¹⁹
- **Addressing challenges to civil society roles.** Religious institutions in many societies are pivotal actors within a broad civil society. They are thus affected by worrying trends to shrink this space and curtail its room for positive action.²⁰ The situation is complicated by ambivalence as to religious roles as civil society actors. Further, understandings of appropriate civil society roles vary widely among countries. Given powerful arguments supporting active civil society roles in just and plural societies, what actions can support renewed respect for civil society roles, including integral roles for religious communities? Are there global norms and positive examples, or do regional differences call for more region- and country-specific approaches?
- **Building on religious experience and assets for delivery of social services to bolster the implementation of the SDGs.** Religious institutions (in many different forms) play vital and direct roles in service delivery in many societies. Health care and education are the most prominent examples but others include land rights adjudication, smallholder farmer support, water supply, and caring for disabled people and vulnerable children.²¹ In some countries (Indonesia, Ireland and Brazil, for example) these functions are integral parts of national systems and policies; elsewhere complex and hybrid arrangements prevail. Data on religious roles are notoriously poor and often contradictory. These religious roles are vital to good governance and in meeting aspirations of people for better and peaceful lives. What practical steps can advance understanding of the complex and central roles that religious

actors play and resolve problems arising where there is ambiguity (for example on the roles of Muslim education)?

- **Contributions to global dialogue on better approaches in situations where states are fragile, especially where conflict impedes the delivery of critical services.** The varied challenges facing the group of states best described as “fragile” have special relevance for religious communities. In virtually all of these societies, religious actors play weighty roles, but this is not properly acknowledged and appreciated in overall policy approaches.²² Engagement of religious actors at specific country levels varies, with central religious roles in some settings (Timor Leste, Democratic Republic of the Congo) but less in others (Haiti, Zimbabwe). What actions could lead to more robust engagement and appreciation both at the global policy level (G7+ for example) and in priority countries?
- **Stateless communities.** With an estimated global population of over 10 million who lack citizenship and the status and security that goes with it,²³ what roles are religious actors playing in moving towards greater security, including acknowledging basic citizenship rights?
- **Vulnerable communities.** Religious actors, including Pope Francis, Patriarch Bartholomew, and Archbishop Justin Welby have spoken out forcefully against modern forms of slavery.²⁴ These include bonded labor, indebtedness traps, trafficking, forced marriage, and child soldiers. This has the makings of an effective multi-religious cause, linking advocacy and action. Religious action on child marriage is a potential parallel. Addressing persecution of specific groups such as albinos, accused witches, and LGBTQ communities is not uncommonly justified in religious terms, suggesting potential paths for inter-religious action. Addressing practices such as female genital cutting (FGC or FGM), which religious leaders assert have no religious foundation, is another potential area for common action.²⁵

3 Social cohesion, migration, and integration

Harmony within plural societies today is tightly linked to ideals and practical dimensions of social cohesion. These in turn reflect explicit or implicit “social contracts” that underlie the legitimacy of governance systems, which shines a light in particular on concepts of mutual responsibilities and rights.

The many definitions and understandings of social cohesion²⁶ include a focus on shared civic values as well as trust in and respect for governing institutions and for human rights.²⁷ It involves a parallel understanding of the responsibilities of various parties, including religious actors. Related notions include social contracts and social capital, which centers on common educational and economic attainments (a critical investment), human-centered approaches, and a degree of consensus as to the society’s strengths and weaknesses.²⁸ Social cohesion stands in opposition to the challenges that face many nations of both polarization and anomie, which are aggravated by weak social institutions. Negative identity politics is both a symptom and a result. Religious beliefs, communities, and institutions are vital contributors to social capital.²⁹ However, where communities are divided and face historical and contemporary tensions, religious identities can accentuate weaknesses and undermine paths towards shared civil values and trust in institutions.³⁰

Migration is an ancient human phenomenon, and in many respects the contemporary levels of movement across national boundaries today are consistent with historical patterns.³¹ There is substantial evidence that migration generally benefits societies, contributing to innovation and wider options that come alongside diversity.³² Nevertheless, actual migratory flows are contributing in visible ways to social tensions in many communities in different world regions.³³ Modern plural societies can challenge communities that have inherited expectations of shared customs and beliefs, including those linked to specific religious traditions. Pressures on societies to integrate new migrants who bring different traditions and expectations can threaten aspects of both explicit and implicit social compacts and, still more broadly, governing institutions. Pressure can upset notions of equity, for example those intrinsic to welfare provisions.³⁴ Experience suggests that it can be difficult to develop commitments that are supportive of government institutions/civil society and migrants/refugees. A central question is what religious leaders and communities can contribute in building the mutual trust and commitment that are vital elements of any viable social contract.

Religious institutions are directly involved in the complex questions and tensions surrounding migration and the reality of increasingly plural societies where different religious communities live in close proximity and with a reality of constant change. They represent symbols (of common purpose or divides) and institutions that uphold specific cultural and civic values and identities. Specific religious beliefs and practices can serve as unifiers or dividers. Inter-religious action, therefore, can play central roles in community understandings of the benefits of migration and of social and cultural diversity, in healing tensions and rifts, and in helping to build towards positive modern plural expectations and values.

High numbers of refugees and forced migrants (estimated at 68 million people in 2017)³⁵ place particular strains in three different situations: (a) societies that have large internally displaced populations, (b) host countries for large refugee populations, and (c) wealthier countries where refugees seek to resettle. These phenomena impose large humanitarian costs and human suffering. The violence associated with many refugee movements and broader migrant flows militates against the ideal of relatively orderly migration. The

expectation that changing climate conditions will significantly accelerate refugee flows and displacement means that current global efforts to address humanitarian policies and institutions take on special urgency.

Again, religious institutions are centrally involved in many dimensions of refugee and other forced displacements. Conflicts resulting in displacements frequently have religious dimensions and religious actors are involved in peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts. Many religiously linked organizations are deeply engaged in humanitarian support to refugees and displaced populations, both in organized refugee settings (camps, for example), and in broader settings where refugees may find themselves. And in many situations, religious communities and specific institutions (HIAS, Church World Service, Jesuit Refugee Service, and Islamic Relief, for example) are major players in the work of resettling refugees, whether in their place of origin or elsewhere. They can play major roles in addressing social strains linked to refugee flows. Religious institutions are often leading advocates for constructive policies towards refugees and forced migration. The Community of Sant'Egidio's leadership on developing and implementing policies for Humanitarian Corridors is an example, among many others.³⁶

The Commission can explore various dimensions of the challenges that currently surround both perceptions and realities around social inclusion in diverse, plural societies broadly, and the specific reactions and policies associated with migration and refugee flows. Inter-religious bodies can be actively involved in working towards forms of social cohesion that promote an inclusive society and respect for diversity and that help, at policy and operational levels, to contend with the crisis of refugees and forced migration. Areas for discussion and action include:

- Building **knowledge about inter-religious initiatives** that specifically address social tensions and work towards building social cohesion, through youth programs, educational curricula and programs, and resolution of inter-group conflicts that impede integration.
- Addressing **urban migration**. Migrants and refugees are drawn to urban settings, which are now home to more than half the world's population. *Religions for Peace* can highlight specific measures and programs that build from realities of urban life in various settings.
- Protecting **religious minorities**, who often face particular challenges to civic acceptance and reasonable accommodation in new social settings. Identifying promising approaches and examples of positive action to promote integration would be helpful. Leadership and participatory roles within religious communities can also provide individuals with a sense of self-worth in host countries where upward social mobility is otherwise limited.³⁷
- Understanding the **roles for women and youth**, which are often lightning rods for tensions. At the same time, programs built on women's and youth leadership offer special promise, with distinctive possibilities for healing and creative solutions. Among second-generation adolescents, religiosity has been linked to higher school engagement, lower levels of violent behavior and fewer behavioral problems.³⁸ Can examples be identified of positive programs and approaches? This includes approaches to family law and family support institutions (orphanages, for example).
- Identifying religious roles vis-à-vis **communications and social media** that challenge or promote social cohesion has special importance. Active efforts can be pursued to highlight and address negative

communications that foster tensions and discord and to build on the powerful positive potential of religious communications channels. For example, Christian Syrian refugees in Jordan expressed the view that churches were a place where they were able to utilize the commonality of Christianity to connect with new circles, and Buddhist temples and religious teachings established and propagated by Vietnamese refugees in Canada eventually attracted many non-Asians, which gave the Vietnamese refugees a chance to establish connections and make an important contribution to their new neighborhoods.³⁹

- Implementing both the **Global Compacts for Refugees and for Migration** is a significant future challenge for all SDG partners. Religious voices have played active roles in consultations leading up to the Compacts⁴⁰ (including at the Istanbul Humanitarian Summit) and in consultations on specific provisions.⁴¹ This effort should continue with definition of concrete steps to that end. Advocacy and action can build on recent efforts to focus particularly on the plight and potential of “children on the move.”⁴²
- Identifying appropriate institutional roles for specific religious actors (“**seats at the table**”) in global dialogue and management of refugee and forced migration.

4 Freedom of religion and belief and religious minorities

The right to freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) is an integral part of both understandings of and commitment to human rights. The right to freedom of conscience at the individual level is linked to basic concepts of human dignity and involves institutional protections that touch on both state interference in the internal affairs of religious institutions and religious involvement in government and politics. Substantial evidence documents the significance of FoRB, both as a fundamental ethical principle that is integral to concepts of equality and respect⁴³ and as a vital factor in flourishing and resilient societies.⁴⁴ The right to FoRB is highlighted at the international level in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in various conventions, and it is enshrined in many national constitutions and in legislation.

There is, however, **substantial debate about FoRB, both as to its definition and to its application.** There are very different understandings across societies as to what the right to FoRB entails. Among areas of disagreement are the extent and circumstances of the right to change one's religion and the right to proselytize with a view to encouraging others to change their religious affiliation. There are also tensions among different human rights, most significantly involving the rights to free speech versus protections against blasphemy and speech that fosters hate and division. There can be disagreements as to religious roles in public education systems—both in delivering education and in shaping curricula and the values that underlie them.

Tolerance is often highlighted as a goal for a free and harmonious society, involving acceptance of differences within that society. The term “tolerance,” however, sparks disagreement insofar as it can imply a reluctant appreciation of others, as opposed to the positive ideals of respect or love. The Commission can build on extensive dialogue around the goals for freedom of religion and belief that are embodied in the understanding of mutual knowledge, understanding, and respect.

Uncertainties and genuine disagreements as to the essential meaning of FoRB are among the reasons for **violations of religious freedom in many parts of the world.** Indeed, recent reports indicate that a large majority of the world's population currently lives in societies where there is not full respect for FoRB. A Pew Research Center report in 2016 indicated that, of the 198 countries included in the study, 24 percent had high or very high levels of government restrictions on freedom of religion and belief in 2014 (the most recent year for which data were available). The share of countries with high or very high social hostilities involving religion declined, dropping from 27 percent to 23 percent.”⁴⁵ A November 2018 report by Aid to the Church in Need⁴⁶ points to grave violations of religious freedom in a total of 38 countries: “In 17 of these, serious discrimination on grounds of religious faith prevails, whereas in the remaining 21 countries, there is outright persecution of religious minorities, in some cases to the point of death.” It says that the situation has deteriorated over the past two years and that, at a global level, overall respect for religious freedom has worsened.

Violations of religious freedom take various forms, some linked directly to government regulations or actions, others to societal attitudes of discrimination or outright hostility. In both instances, violence is often involved, whether state oppression (extra-judicial action, targeted sanctions and oppression) or communal

violence. The destruction of holy sites is a common tragic reality that can cause violence to flare; positive action like the Code of Conduct on Holy Sites is an example of positive and creative inter-religious efforts to address the issue.⁴⁷

Two related phenomena are of particular concern: **forms of extreme nationalism**, and rising focus on specific religious communities because of **systemic discrimination and violence** (anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, in particular).⁴⁸ The two tend to be linked, as extreme nationalism can accentuate a focus on specific religious identities, especially in countries where nationality is linked to religion. Generally, however, most citizens who practice discrimination and violence do so outside the law.

Religious freedom has been part of the mandate of human rights defenders, both public (for example, within the United Nations system or national governments) and private (civil society organizations). However, **historically there has been some distance between advocates of human rights broadly and of FoRB per se**. Religious freedom has been viewed within most human rights communities as so integral a part of human rights as not to require special focus, while for various FoRB-focused actors the right to freedom in religious practice supersedes and takes precedence over other aspects of human rights. In the United States, 1998 legislative provisions established an ambassador responsible for advancing religious freedom, annual reporting on the state of religious freedom in each country, and a bipartisan commission on religious freedom. More recently, other governments have appointed senior officers with a FoRB portfolio. These include inter alia Germany and Denmark and, previously, Canada. On a global scale, the Code of Conduct on Holy Sites, which maps out a practical code and policy for holy sites worldwide, has been endorsed by religious leaders and institutions since its completion in 2011.

The brunt of restrictions on religious freedom most often falls on **religious minorities**. Thus a focus on the situation of these minorities is a concern for *Religions for Peace* and religious communities worldwide.

Within the United Nations (focused in the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights—OHCHR) a series of encounters have focused on reaching beyond consensus to concrete commitments to prohibit national advocacy of racial and religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence. These efforts are reflected in the **Rabat Plan of Action**.⁴⁹ **The goal is “to provide guidance on how to balance Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which provides for freedom of expression, and Article 20, which prohibits incitement of discrimination, hostility or violence.”** The effort has involved a succession of workshops and meetings. On the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the Rabat Plan of Action in 2017, more than 100 states, national human rights institutions, regional organizations, religious authorities and faith-based civil society actors participated in the Rabat+5 symposium.⁵⁰

Another important development is a focus among leading Muslim scholars and religious leaders on **reaffirming commitments to protect minorities within religious communities**. This was the focus of a January 2016 meeting in Marrakech, Morocco, inspired by Sheikh Bin Bayah, which affirmed the Marrakech Declaration. The agreements reflected in the declaration have been affirmed and expanded in the course of further international gatherings (most recently in December 2018 in Abu Dhabi) that have focused both on religious minorities within majority Muslim countries and on Muslim minorities in other countries.⁵¹ There have also been significant efforts, many involving multi-religious institutions and notably *Religions for Peace*,

to address the **plight of Christian and other minorities in the Middle East and of threatened Muslim communities, notably in Myanmar and in China.**

There is a need for religious leaders and scholars to work together to clarify understandings of the significance of FoRB and reasons for widespread violations. This might begin with affirmations of the ideals involved in positive pluralism, building on historic examples (such as the Convivencia in Andalusia, the period when different religious communities lived together in at least relative harmony). Points of tension to address include: the management of hate speech; legal measures that restrict freedoms of religion and belief; targeting of holy sites or holy events like pilgrimages; and rising discrimination and persecution based on religious beliefs and practices. Efforts to address the many tensions that surround different approaches to proselytizing deserves a priority. While the principles of equal access of all communities, commitment not to engage in efforts to convert as part of relief work, and neutrality are well established in international humanitarian covenants and other frameworks, there is far less clarity where development-related work is involved.

5 Challenges represented by social and cultural violence

Violence that occurs within societies, in its many forms, is a central concern across world communities, institutions, and leaders. Violence has many complex causes and it takes very different forms. Connections between violence and religious beliefs are complex and contested; in some instances, causal links are clear (when religious identities are invoked with hostile intent), while in others, religious dimensions are peripheral or ascribed fallaciously. Addressing social and cultural violence, whether it involves religious beliefs and actors directly or not, thus represents a central challenge for inter-religious action.

Conflicts today cause immeasurable suffering: death, hunger and famine; destruction of infrastructure and livelihoods; and massive human displacement. Non-state actors are increasingly those most directly involved in unrest and violence that disrupt lives and curtail progress towards peaceful and flourishing societies. Most modern conflicts present challenges that differ markedly from those addressed through classic warfare and diplomacy, and solutions are far from evident. In many instances, long-brewing conflicts defy resolution and uneasy settlements are all too common. Boundaries between “official” and other combatants are blurred, resulting in protracted, seemingly shapeless violence and tensions. The power of organized crime, accentuated in societies with deeply embedded corruption, is another factor.

Facts about what is happening at global and more local levels with respect to social violence and related global trends are disputed. **A positive narrative⁵² traces a declining incidence of violence, especially conflicts among states. Various societies have successfully and substantially reduced levels of communal conflict and criminal violence. However, alternative, far less positive narratives** underscore the changing nature of violent conflicts and their devastating impact. Violent conflicts recur and the work of reconciliation (a prime task of religious institutions) shows mixed results. There is truth in both narratives, offering grounds for hope and confidence that collective efforts can reduce the pain of violent tensions. But there is also concern at signs of different patterns of violence and difficulties in turning violent situations around in areas like Central America, parts of Africa, and regions of South Asia.

Fragile state situations prevail in significant parts of the world, where governments are unable to assure security and fair and just legal protections to their citizens.⁵³ Prospects for the future in these situations are dampened by weak basic education and health services as well as weak law enforcement or widespread social conflicts. **Legacies of trauma are passed on from generation to generation.** Violence and violations of the rights of citizens are sadly the rule. Broad understandings of an international “**responsibility to protect**” come into conflict with notions of sovereignty and the rights of societies and their governments to determine future directions.

Trends towards authoritarian approaches are often driven in part by concerns for security and failures of governments (corrupt, inefficient, or simply disinterested) to provide basic protections and services. **Extreme forms of nationalism** and other extremist movements can often reflect unrelated citizen frustrations and grievances. Strongmen promise order and crackdowns on corruption and lawlessness, but their response often

tramples on basic human rights. Reactions may target specific communities or accentuate social tensions and violence by scapegoating segments of society, all too often on the basis of their religious identities.

How are religious beliefs and institutions involved in this complex of factors that threaten security in contemporary societies and in the responses we witness in different situations? How are they involved, actually and potentially, in working towards solutions?

The **links between violence and religion** are complex and hotly disputed. Various contemporary conflicts are widely perceived as essentially linked to religious differences. These include social tensions, for example in Nigeria's Middle Belt where a complex of economic, social, ethnic, and religious identities are in contention, or specific movements such as Al Qaeda and Daesh that describe their motivations and ideologies in religious terms. Invariably, the realities are far more complex than a specific tie to religious beliefs or even identities; demographic, social, economic, political, and cultural forces are always at work. The misuse of religious teachings is a particular source of concern and has prompted numerous efforts to affirm what are and what are not authoritative understandings of religious beliefs and identities.

Including **cultural aspects of social behavior** as a focus can help in deepening understandings of how to address violence even as it underscores the complexities of the issues at stake. It can help in unpacking the complex roles of religious beliefs and institutions in the effort, providing tools to distinguish theology and religious practice from cultural norms and traditions. The scholar Johan Galtung introduced a concept of "cultural violence" that involves "any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimize violence in its direct or structural form." He emphasizes that "symbolic violence built into a culture does not kill or maim like direct violence or the violence built into the structure. However, it is used to legitimize either or both, as for instance in the theory of a *Herrenvolk*, or a superior race."⁵⁴ Notions of cultural violence are linked to religious roles where there are indistinct boundaries separating cultural norms related to violence and religious teachings.

Security is commonly the essential first priority concern for citizens. This echoes the central theme of the *Religions for Peace* Kyoto Assembly in 2006, which focused on the vital notion of "**shared security**."⁵⁵ Safety means freedom from the fear of violence, whether criminal or arbitrary action by states. In today's plural societies, security follows from social cohesion that is built on respect for diversity, efficient and fair legal and judicial systems, and good governance. The concept of "human security" embodies a broad understanding that physical security is linked to good governance, human development, and a balanced and sustainable approach to the natural environment. Civic values and citizenship are central elements of security. Capacities to resolve tensions and conflicts, to "build peace," are essential.

Positive visions for paths towards a better future (sustainable development) are a central pillar of security. Positive notions of peace and human security, including security for religious minorities and vulnerable groups, are central to an understanding of modern phenomena of violence and thus of efforts to address them. Inter-religious action can build on the various approaches to security that include human security and national security. A question for the 2019 Assembly is how far the "shared security" and "shared wellbeing" concepts have been tested in interfaith approaches to promote just and harmonious societies. **How do these approaches that focus on the core idea of "shared" play out as a statement, and as a possible operational approach?**

Religious roles in peacemaking and peacebuilding are the focus of another *Religions for Peace* Commission. Five topics are central to this Commission:

- **Countering Violent Extremism:** Governments worldwide seek effective policies to address the ravages caused by non-state social and political movements that deliberately use violence to achieve their ends. However, experts disagree sharply about why such movements persist and on the most appropriate response. How religious factors contribute to such extremist movements and associated violence is a central and sensitive topic. The common framing as “Countering Violent Extremism”—CVE, or “Preventing Violent Extremism”—PVE, can mask underlying complexities that demand sensitive understandings of religious roles and engagement with religious actors.⁵⁶ Explicit or implicit assumptions that religious factors and especially Islam are centrally involved in both extremism and violence exacerbate intergroup tensions and impede efforts to engage leaders in meaningful responses. Negative consequences include dominance of security perspectives, threats to human rights, and tradeoffs that undermine development efforts. Understandings and approaches at international and national levels about the involvement of religious factors in forms of violence that range from terrorist attacks to uprisings **need careful review**. Inter-religious approaches to this challenge have particular importance and promise.
- **Extreme nationalism and responses to populism.** Political and social expressions of nationalism pose rising challenges in different societies. Many have features aptly described as extremist, notably in their tendency to accentuate certain religious and cultural features in sharp opposition to others. Some forms of nationalism foster violent behaviors, including oppression of minorities and vigilantism. Inter-religious bodies have opportunities to name and elaborate on negative features of nationalist narratives and their practical manifestations. By modeling and teaching about social and political narratives that contest negative aspects of nationalism, they can trace paths towards more inclusive and constructive social and political approaches. There are numerous examples of religious groups spearheading outcry against extreme nationalism, and holding governments accountable through advocacy, lobbying, and other means.
- **Failures of rule of law and breakdowns in social order.** Inter-religious action can play important roles in various situations where states are fragile as well as in spaces that can be considered ungoverned. In such settings, religious actors and institutions can provide de facto governance and services, such as health care, education, and social protection. They often have unparalleled knowledge of community needs and assets as well as the reasons for failures of governance and sources of conflict. Given the variety of situations and circumstances, common models for action are elusive. However, reflection on best practices could point to positive paths. Religious voices should be more deliberately engaged in global reflections on fragile state situations, including responding to challenges presented by gang dominance and other breakdowns in governance.
- **Social media as a driver of dissention versus a force for cohesion and shared understanding.** The rapid rise in access to social media is transforming challenges of social communication. Critical issues include active efforts to use social media to diffuse malicious and hate speech targeted against specific communities, and the spread of false information. Sharp increases in use of social media in many places, Myanmar for example, mean that trends towards violence (political, religious, ethnic, and cultural) are exacerbated. Religious actors vary widely in their use of and approach to social media and

related modern communications media. Some are active and constructive users, while others stand back. Extremist elements have shown a noteworthy capacity to use social media to their ends. Clamping down rigidly on social media also has negative consequences, curtailing free speech and encouraging alternative channels. Concerted efforts to work with the relevant companies (Facebook, for example) and regulators to address negative aspects are needed.

- **Countering violence through culture.** Religious communities engage in both religious and cultural activities that can play material roles in addressing tendencies towards violence. These include artistic ventures such as films and television, the Fes Festival of Global Sacred Music,⁵⁷ and the Western-Eastern Divan orchestra in Seville founded by Daniel Barenboim and the late Edward Said.⁵⁸ These aim to build shared cultural understanding and open paths to dialogue. Also included are approaches through sports (especially those that involve youth),⁵⁹ and different forms of people-to-people exchanges.

6 Peace education

Education is widely seen as critical to building and sustaining successful societies. Education is an essential part of forming civic values and thus social cohesion and cultures that promote peace. The challenges involved include the accepted global commitments to universal, quality education as well as more specific forms of education geared specifically to the challenges of avoiding and managing tensions and conflict, which are often described as peace education.

Religious involvement in education is far more significant in many countries than is generally appreciated in global discussions of education.⁶⁰ It includes direct delivery of education through schools and universities (as well as radio learning, adult literacy, early childhood education and other forms). Religious institutions also play more indirect roles across a wide spectrum, influencing development of educational curricula and the implicit or explicit values that underlie international and national education policies and implementation mechanisms. Their roles and challenges have particular significance in training future religious leaders. Religious bodies play vital roles in providing education in refugee and forced migration situations. And they can be powerful advocates for inclusive and high-quality education at national and international levels, as well as within specific communities.

Peace education is an essential facet of general educational approaches.⁶¹ It is a long-standing area of interest and commitment for *Religions for Peace*, including through a Standing Commission on Peace Education,” which did important work under the leadership of Professor Johannes Lähnemann. Curricula and teaching styles need to focus on the skills and values essential for peaceful societies as integral parts of policy and its application. Specific focus on conflict management and understandings of diversity and respect are essential parts of peace education. Examples of religiously inspired peace education approaches are the Arigatou Foundation’s Ethics Education program⁶² and the Schools for Peace that the Community of Sant’Egidio sponsors in many conflict-prone communities.⁶³ The Global Network of Religions for Children (another Arigatou Initiative) has focused sharply on religious efforts to work together to reduce violence against children.

Peace education focuses primarily (but not exclusively) on children. It is significant that 2019 (when the *Religions for Peace* Global Assembly takes place) will mark the 30th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. A special focus on issues around values in education, quality and relevance of education, and education for vulnerable populations (including refugees and internally displaced people) deserve a special role in the Assembly.

7 Challenges for multi-religious action: Religious assets

Multi-religious action in 2019 takes many forms; both the experience and wisdom gained through such action and the plethora of formal and informal institutions are vital assets for the *Religions for Peace* agenda.⁶⁴

The Global Assembly calls for a focus on transnational approaches that bridge different religious traditions, both to address differences and tensions and to focus positively on advancing shared goals and agendas for action. Religious institutions in many senses are the most ancient transnational, global bodies, working across national and geographic boundaries. Historically, the major global networks, and notably *Religions for Peace*, have focused most prominently on peace and conflict resolution. However, the Sustainable Development Goals reflect a global architecture that highlights efforts to move outside the institutional and intellectual siloes that have separated peacebuilding from other facets of global agendas. Inter-religious approaches and institutions are likewise called to broaden agendas and partnerships.

The challenges also involve more localized multi-religious approaches and initiatives, where there are important assets to build on. Regional, national, and local multi-religious action presents a dizzying picture of different initiatives and institutions, both formal and informal.

The most effective multi-religious actions combine global visions and transnational links with institutions and approaches grounded at more local levels. They combine, as the introductory section argued, “**fire from above**,” in the sense of global perspectives and broad leadership, with “**fire from below**”—action at the local and community level. The challenge is to build spaces and channels of communication that bring the two forces of energy together in collaborative ideas and work.

Multi-religious assets vary across several spectrums.

A first encompasses **basic approaches to dialogue and action** (separating the two rigidly is not constructive as ideas and action are synergistically linked). At one end of the spectrum are theological and intellectual exchanges that aim both to foster and reinforce shared understandings and address differences, especially those that can contribute to tensions and violence. At the other end of the spectrum are various forms of “dialogue for action.” Such approaches are grounded in a belief that uniting around a common, practical topic allows different communities to know each other as they work together to learn about and solve problems. For both theological dialogue and more action-oriented approaches, the canvas for consideration may be as broad as social peace or as narrow as a highly specific topic like a contested water point or school building.

A second spectrum relates to **timeframe**. Numerous multi-religious initiatives arise in response to specific crises (attacks on religious sites led to the Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites, for example) and represent common efforts to combine symbolic unity with practical, immediate support that addresses specific circumstances. These efforts may last beyond the immediate crisis but often do not. Other initiatives take a longer-term approach and may involve processes that extend over years or decades.

Multi-religious action can involve a wide range of religious communities and actors, whether formal leadership or actors representing the wider community. Some action may focus within a single tradition or even part of a community (often termed ecumenical). In many respects the most challenging forms of dialogue, which are an increasing norm and expectation in today's complex settings, involve widely different actors, religious and non-religious, public and private. Successful initiatives and partnerships tend to focus on inclusive and transparent processes (with, for example, objectives and timeframe well defined) and often focus on specific challenges, at least as a starting point. This need not imply rigidities of process or undue focus on specified outcomes, since a feature (and often an asset) of multi-religious cross-sectoral work is its creativity and capacity to adapt to changing circumstances and evolving understanding. An example is a multi-faith initiative in Ghana that began with a focus on sanitation and waste and later proved instrumental in an inter-religious effort to prevent violence around elections.

8 Guiding questions for engaging Commission discussion on the topic

Commission consultations will need to focus on issues of process, and on targets, outcomes, and priorities for multi-religious engagement in relation to the broad agendas involved in working for just and harmonious societies. Guiding questions include:

- Are there common, shared understandings of the reasons for eroding trust in institutions globally? What explains failures of governance in many settings?
- What more can religious communities do, collectively, to address problems of embedded corruption that erode confidence in institutions and detract from both delivery of development and understandings of social justice?
- How can religious communities work together to address challenges to the shrinking of civil society space?
- Formal religious institutions have weak traditions for equal voice for all, and notably for women and youth. In considering just and harmonious societies, how can religious leaders assure that a diverse range of voices are heard?
- What practical actions can religious groups take to address the challenges facing refugees and displaced populations, both to assist them in humanitarian crises and to support successful integration in host states?
- What actions can assure a constant, purposeful focus on the poorest and most vulnerable people and communities? That includes those subject to modern slavery and especially threatened groups such as LGBTQ communities, members of minority religious groups, atheists, and adolescent girls.
- With tensions often linked to elections and government transitions, what roles can religious institutions play in this vital dimension of democratic societies?
- What action could help clarify understandings of the core meaning of freedom of religion and belief, and of how to address violations of that freedom across world regions?
- What action can religious communities, individually and in various alliances, take to advance quality education, including education that focuses specifically on peaceful behaviors and support for institutions?
- What forms of multi-religious and religious-secular partnerships are most effective?
- What lessons can be learned from efforts to build multi-religious institutions and initiatives? What are the most pertinent lessons from successful, as well as from less successful, ventures?

9 Concluding comments

The task of promoting just and harmonious societies in the contemporary world involves enormous challenges. Current trends have vital and positive features that offer opportunities and resources our ancestors could have scarcely imagined, much less achieved. As we face the myriad threats that are the daily fodder of news reports and witness real misery of fellow citizens, the positives and assets need to be borne in mind. This is especially important as what we might view as gifts of globalization (technologies that enhance knowledge and speed communications, concerted measures to shed of social barriers like slavery, race, and caste, for example) are accompanied by both ancient and new ills and seeds of conflict. Complicating matters is a greater appreciation today for the ways in which seemingly separate problems, sectors, and institutions are in practice inseparable, linked in countless ways.

Religious institutions are involved in every facet of the global challenges that are most aptly defined in the architecture of the Sustainable Development Goals. One of the many assets they bring is an ancient understanding, articulated in some traditions as the notion of the whole person, that indeed the challenges we confront are interlinked, from core ideas through the most practical details of application on the ground.

The challenges of promoting just and harmonious societies cannot be separated from the dual reality (and challenge) of diversity in a world where common destinies have never been so clear and where there is an earnest quest for shared values and understandings to allow common action towards a just and sustainable future. That calls for an honest appreciation of differences, of cultures, core values, and even basic objectives. It calls for an understanding of plural communities that extends well beyond tolerance to respect for and rejoicing in diversity. The polarization and divisions that mark contemporary politics reflect the realities of diversity. Who better than religious communities, with their compass focus on ethical principles and deep commitment to equity, to help in bridging the divides?

The key question is how to move diverse actors and perspectives in positive directions. There are many assets to build on, including existing multi-religious experience and institutions. Building on those assets means taking stock of different approaches and analyzing both successes and failures. Different institutions and networks bring different strengths, which can ideally be linked in “networks of networks.” At national levels, the host of national dialogue efforts and specific commissions to address truth and reconciliation offer a promising example of ambitious efforts to address the challenges of building just and harmonious societies, often in the wake of bitter conflicts. A multitude of positive actions at local levels involve diverse religious actors, working in widely different communities. They offer hope and inspiration for what can be achieved.

The global agendas that have at their very core the goal of flourishing, diverse societies cannot be advanced or achieved without complex partnerships— as recognized in the SDG architecture. While there is increasing appreciation that religious institutions are in integral part of modern societies, the mechanisms for including religious voices “at the tables” are less clearly defined. Thus forward movement requires actions that will assure that religious dimensions are seen as an essential. That involves religious literacy among the wide range of global actors (United Nations, national governments, business, civil society, academia) so that the assets and concerns that religious actors bring are appreciated. It also calls for efforts by religious actors, with central roles for multi-religious institutions, to demonstrate the wisdom and capacities they bring.

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Helpful websites:

- **The Global Women of Faith Network and Global Interfaith Youth Network (from RfP):**
<https://rfp.org/connect/global-women-of-faith-network>;
<https://rfp.org/connect/global-interfaith-youth-network>
- **African Council of Religious Leaders (also from RfP):** <http://acrl-rfp.org>
- **United Religions Initiative:** <http://www.uri.org>
- **Tanenbaum:** <https://tanenbaum.org>
- **Islamic Society of North America:** <http://www.isna.net>
- **Arigatou International:** <https://gnrc.net/en>
- **The Multifaith Action Society in Canada:** <https://multifaithaction.jimdo.com>
- **ARRCC (Australian multi-faith effort to fight climate change):** <https://www.arrcc.org.au>

There are also some exciting steps being taken to improve evaluation of multi-religious initiatives – for example:

- **Effective Inter-religious Action in Peacebuilding project (EIAP) out of AfP & partners:**
<https://jliflc.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/EIAP-Guide-Pilot-Phase-Draft-03.08.17.pdf>;
<https://allianceforpeacebuilding.org/our-work/about-our-work/peacebuilding-evaluation/effective-inter-religious-action-in-peacebuilding>
- **Georgetown University Berkley Center, WFDD:**
<https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu>;
<https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/WFDD>
- **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights:**
<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx>

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