



World Council of Churches

WELCOMING THE OTHER THROUGH CITIZENSHIP FOR JUST AND HARMONIOUS SOCIETIES

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Religions for Peace 9th World Assembly - Vienna, 21 November 2013

Your Eminences, Your Excellencies, Dear friends and participants in this (Religions for Peace) Assembly.

‘God of life lead us to justice and peace.’ It gives me great pleasure and honour to be here with you and greet you on behalf of the WCC just two weeks after we celebrated the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Busan, Republic of Korea. That prayer which speaks of our longing for justice and peace throughout our world echoed powerfully through our hearts and minds throughout our time in Korea. It spoke both into and out of our Korean context.

The WCC has carried away from our Assembly in Korea a deep and enduring commitment. We are inviting our member churches and others to join with us in a pilgrimage for justice and peace: indeed we have already begun this pilgrimage, asking God, in the words of the New Testament song, to ‘guide our steps into the way of peace.’

We believe that questing together for justice and peace lies at the very heart of what is meant by Christian witness and the role of the churches and the ecumenical movement in today’s world. It is also a vital part of our theology and spirituality. Such a quest will inform the core work and life of the WCC in the coming years.

I have been asked to talk today on the question of ‘welcoming the other through citizenship for just and harmonious societies’. The fullness of the biblical concept of peace, which is so much more than the mere absence of war, conveys the idea of wholeness and completeness. At the WCC we believe that such peace has four complementary and interlocking dimensions: peace within the community; peace between peoples; peace in the marketplace; peace with creation. I see a close link between such a biblical understanding of peace and a ‘harmonious society’ in which all citizens are valued and cherished for the differences and particularities that they can contribute to make up the rich texture of their society as a whole. We need therefore to take special care in situations where the possibility of equal citizenship is unclear or where citizenship is not present at all, as it is for the too many stateless people in the world.

This is important, and urgent in many contexts today. The WCC has particularly addressed this in the swiftly shifting landscape of the Middle East. Many key states throughout the region are undergoing a sharp process of transition, in several cases accompanied by violent conflict, such as in Syria. The old order which has endured often for many years is passing away: what will be the shape of the societies to come? As a world community of Christians we feel a particular call to be in solidarity with those who live in the lands where our faith began and first developed. I am encouraged to hear from many of you that the Christian presence and witness in the lands of our Holy Bible is absolutely significant for all of us. I believe that we want to, need to, must stand with our Christian brothers and sisters in these lands. They seek to share fully with other citizens in a common effort in these days to build democratic civil societies, fortified by positive attitudes to education, based on an understanding of common and equal citizenship contributing to the well-being – indeed harmony – of their nations.

This understanding of common citizenship has to be undergirded by the rule of law, social justice and respect for human rights, including religious freedom and freedom of conscience. Such a commitment to common citizenship in the countries of the Middle East is, I believe, paradigmatic for what is meant by the challenge to ‘welcome the other through citizenship for just and harmonious societies’. Through a number of key initiatives the WCC is supporting Christians in the region in their commitment to engage in constructive dialogue with other religious and ethnic communities so that their countries’ diverse heritage is protected and secured.

Despite the current turmoil in the region, the long term commitment of the churches, supported by the WCC, is to remain steadfast to sow seeds of peace and justice, and hold on to the progress that is being made during this difficult time of transition.

This Middle East, and the life of our significant member churches in this region, must remain a prime focus of the WCC’s efforts at this time in welcoming the other to work together as co-citizens to create just and harmonious societies, but it is far from being our only focus. It is good to be sharing this platform today with Cardinal John Onaiyekan, for whose gracious participation in and support of last year’s high level Christian-Muslim delegation to Nigeria jointly organised by the WCC and the Royal Jordanian Aal Al Bayt Institute I am profoundly thankful. That visit was not only an act of accompaniment by Christians and Muslims, but a model for interreligious dialogue, mutual learning and action.

The situation of Nigeria, is of course very different from that of the Middle East, not least in terms of demographics, with a national population balanced almost equally between Christian and Muslim elements. That demographic profile brings its own, at times very sharp, challenges to the question of welcoming the other as co-citizens. It forces both religious traditions, Christian and Muslim, to ask some hard questions of themselves about their respective understanding of the relationship between faith and the public square.

We hope that in some small way the various fruits of the visit of last year's visit, on which we are still working, will encourage a deeper respect, among both Christians and Muslims for the value of the religious 'other' both as human beings created in God's image and likeness, and as co-citizens and builders of a common society. Given its key situation and leading role in Africa, Nigeria is a country which undoubtedly has also the potential to play a leading role in Africa to wrestle with the need to take seriously both religious affiliation and the importance of working together with the other for the common good. As a followup to our visit, we realised that we should do more to share information and to reference how peace belongs to our faiths, so it is my pleasure to present to Cardinal John a copy of this book, just published by the WCC which is an anthology of Peace in Christian Life and Thought. A similar book on Peace in the Muslim tradition has been published by Prince Ghazi, our partner in Nigeria.

Pressure of time does not allow me to explore in detail other contexts which offer different challenges relating to otherness and our societies, but I want at least to mention the situation in Europe today, where the story of citizenship has been a long one and sometimes less than just. We have to remember the tragedies and failures of the past, from which the Jewish community has suffered greatly. Even today there are a number of ongoing challenges faced particularly by members of ethnic communities, many of whom are Muslims. I rejoice that in most European nations today the majority of Christian churches regularly use their position of comparative privilege to seek to enable those of other religions to play an integral and full role as co-citizens within the nation. It is essential to our Christian faith that all human beings are created in God's own image. I believe that citizenship can and should be a tool to protect the dignity and rights of all human beings, particularly the vulnerable, helping to enable their intrinsic worth to be safe-guarded.

I began by speaking of how our Assembly in Busan challenged us as Christians to re-commit ourselves to being pilgrims for justice and peace. But in fact our vision is wider than that. We believe that our sisters and brothers of our religious traditions have much to offer, and that our pilgrimage must include an invitation to God to walk along side, to contribute gifts and insights, reflecting the common value of life for all. As the Message from our Assembly puts it, we want to 'challenge all people of good will', whatever their faith or religious tradition, 'to engage their God-given gifts in transforming actions.' I am speaking not only of the leadership, but it is our desire to empower the efforts of all ordinary people for peace. 'May we indeed seed the Good News so that justice will grow and God's deep peace rest on our world.' 'God of life, lead us to justice and peace.'