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**VAŽNOST MEĐURELIGIJSKOG DIJALOGA O TEMI ETIKE I ZAKONA:
GLOBALNA PERSPEKTIVA**

**THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUES ON ETHICS
AND LAW: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE**

Abstract¹

The present article pleads for the revival of an interreligious dialogue on ethics and law as an instrument of peace and reconciliation. Whereas the first phase of IRD was marked by a considerable prominence of these topics, they have become of less importance in the second phase. This needs correction for two reasons. Theoretically the rationality of dogmatic or systematic insights (as found in all faith traditions) is largely exclusive, whereas the rationality of ethics, also religiously founded ethics, is basically inclusive. It is therefore open to dialogue. There exists considerable common ground on norms, rules and values between religious traditions, which are to serve humans, the society and the political community. This is of particular importance in today's multi-religious societies as well as in a world more than ever interconnected by globalization. The article concludes with an analysis of the document on Human Fraternity of Pope Francis and Grand Imam Ahmad al-Tayyeb and its ethical approach to dialogue.

Key words: *Christianity, Dialogue, Ethics, Fratelli tutti.*

¹ Parts of this article are a revised version of a paper by the author published in *The Journal Asian Horizons* in 2019.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUES ON ETHICS AND LAW: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

The present phase of modernity is characterized by globalization, growing pluralism in societies and a religious renaissance in many parts of the world, which also affects the political sphere and the backbone of modern institutions, nationally as well as internationally. Human rights, democracy and the nation state thus are under pressure and need to be reconciled with the ancient wisdom as well as ethical legacies of religions as they have developed over millennia.¹ Otherwise political struggles, tensions and even wars that destroy social relations and the fabric of societies will multiply. In this situation interreligious dialogues on ethics can play a central role in contributing to peace and reconciliation within and between religious communities. This, after all, has been their original aim. It is of even greater importance in an age in which global contacts increase at an unprecedented speed. This first and foremost goal of interreligious dialogue should, as I will argue in this article, therefore again be brought to the centre,² so as to enhance mutual understanding in multi-religious societies and further cooperation in all those social and political fields where the common good requires unity in purpose and best practices. For this, it is vital to understand the nature and special characteristics of such dialogues on ethics and law, which, as I am to show, differ from those on faith issues in a narrower sense.

This article starts out with some introductory reflections on ethics and dialogue. In a second part I will demonstrate why interreligious dialogue on ethics and law differs from those on matters of faith and attempt to outline their specificities. In a third chapter the position of the Roman Catholic Church on interreligious dialogue will be sketched with a focus on the document of Abu Dhabi signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Ahzar university, Ahmad al-Tayyeb, in 2019 and which has been taken up in the pope's encyclical *Fratelli tutti* (September 2020) which carries considerable weight for interreligious dialogue in the field of ethics and law.

¹ Cf. in detail: Gabriel IG. *Ethik des Politischen. Grundlagen – Prinzipien – Konkretionen*. Würzburg: Echter; 2020.

² For a variety of reasons this has not been the case lately. See Thus, to give but one example, Cornille C editor. *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Interreligious Dialogue*. Oxford: John Wiley & Sons; 2013. contains no article on ethics or law and interreligious dialogue.

1. Some Introductory Reflections on Ethics and Dialogue

In the Western context since Greek antiquity the task of ethics has been to systematically reflect on norms, virtues, rules, and role models as they exist in all societies, cultures and religions.³ Thereby, any ethics, religious as well as secular, is based on the anthropological insight that humans everywhere and at all times have in common. There exists a fundamental difference between the very way they do act and the way they *ought* to act. This *ethical difference* is a characteristic of human life with its foundation in human freedom. Ethics presupposes that humans are able to act freely, even if their freedom is always impeded to a certain degree by outer and inner limitations in concrete life situation. It seems banal but clarifies the issue: Norms are not needed where the factual does not differ from the normative. There are no rules and sanctions needed to force people to sleep, eat or move, but there are those commandments necessary so that they do not kill, steal or harm their fellows in other ways. This anthropological characteristic, albeit an everyday phenomenon, is in itself thought provoking. It is a transcendental trait specific to humans not to be found in other creatures.

The right and wrong, what is to be done or what is not to be done, is thereby embedded in particular cultural and religious contexts. This is demonstrated in the Greek language in which the words *ethos* and *ethics* are closely interrelated. *Ethos* originally means “pasture” or “home” indicating that human praxis has its origin in a local community, the insights and habits of which are transmitted by a particular moral language that forms the ethical views of the individuals belonging to this community. In monotheistic religions the most important norms, values and virtues, moreover, have their ultimate source in divine revelation. This gives them a special relevance and dignity. At the same time, however, they are incorporated into the *ethoi* of particular societies, in which they are interpreted and re-interpreted so as to adapt them to changing circumstances and anchor them in the self-understanding of individuals and communities and their moral languages. Philosophical as well as sacred texts and the norms, values and virtues they communicate are thus cultural as well as universal, religious as well as philosophical. In the Mediterranean context “Athens” joins with “Jerusalem” (and later “Mecca”), philosophical ethical reflection with divine revelations. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics demonstrate how the *ethos* as moral practice (including its religious dimensions) is made fruitful for ethics as their systematic philosophical reflection.⁴ Albeit Aristotle’s ethics was at first intended for the Greeks of his time only, its basic insights, e. g. on virtue or justice, can be of universal relevance. This continues to this day, even though certain ethical positions of his are outdated because of later ethical and religious developments. Thus Aristotle’s view according to which slaves, women and children are

³ The terminology differs. Thus, in the Anglo-American context ethics often goes by the name of moral philosophy.

⁴ The axial age theory shows that similar developments may have taken place in other parts of the globe before our era, cf. Bellah RN editor. *Religion in Human Evolution – From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2011. Gabriel IG. *Antigone war nicht nur hier*, in: Hladschik P and Steinert F editors. *Menschenrechten Gestalt und Wirksamkeit verleihen – Making Human Rights Work*. Vienna: NWV; 2019. p. 719-730.

attributed a reduced status as humans has been overcome later by biblical revelation with its core message that all humans are created equal before God whatever their position in society may be. This reference to the evolution of ethics in the Western context is to show that ethical insights change over time even though their anthropological foundations may be universally understood. If Aristotle were to raise from his grave, he would most probably acknowledge without hesitation that the inferior status he attributed to slaves and women was an accidental and not an essential element of his ethical theory.

Moreover, there exists considerable common ground between the *ethoi* of different ethnic and religious communities. Already the fact that we are able to argue about differences between them points to the fact that there is a common human understanding on basic contents. Thus despite all differences and even rifts on ethical and legal norms and on virtues in a globalized world we can speak about a moral common language on the good and the just.

To give but one example. The most fundamental norm “Thou shalt not kill” is universal. There exists no culture in which manslaughter is not prohibited, since it destroys the very fabric of society. What differs is the range of this prohibition which evolves over time (e. g. of the rules in war or the death penalty). It is subject to an ongoing process of ethical debates locally and globally, nationally and internationally.

A second insight common to our philosophical as well as religious heritage is that man is a *dialogical being*. Greek philosophers spoke of humans as having the word (*logon echon*) regarding this an essential characteristic of the human race. *Dia-logou* literally meaning “through the word” equals “through reason” (*logos* meaning both language and reason in Greek) denotes a form of human communication that recognizes the other as equal, endowed with the same ability to reflect as well as as a creature with ideas and convictions worth listening to. Dialogue thus constitutes the opposite to violence, which is either mute or manipulative denying the other’s freedom and dignity. In listening to the other, we appreciate his/her insights. At the same time dialogue presupposes that truth exists, but that we depend on others to discover it in ever greater fullness. It would thus be mistaken to associate dialogue with an arbitrary or relativistic world view — be it religious non-religious.

For Plato ignorance is overcome, truth acquired and humans are transformed in speaking to each other (*dia-logein*). That no definite answers are given in these most famous dialogues of his, i.e. that they are aporetic, indicates that this process of the search for truth remains necessarily in evolution. Still, he attributes to it a numinous quality because, as he writes, in talking to the other often and intensively, a light suddenly appears in the soul which leads to new insights, a passage eloquently describing the experience of dialogue at its best.⁵ I may say from experience that this holds true also for interreligious dialogues.

The fact that we need to speak with others in all life situations affirms that no single human being possesses the whole truth *hic and nunc* in its fullness and is independent of the wisdom and knowledge of others. This holds true for individuals but also for cultures and religions. We need the cultural and religious others to better understand

⁵ In the 20th century important philosophers (Martin Buber, Ferdinand Ebner, and Jürgen Habermas) reemphasized dialogue. Also science, after all, constitutes a highly formalized methodological dialogical process in search of truth.

our own beliefs in all their dimensions. In this sense the renowned French anthropologist Claude Levy-Strauss wrote: "The only thing that can become fatal for a group of humans, and a real burden, that will prevent it to fully realize its own nature, is to be alone."⁶ All humans thus depend on each other in their search for the truth. This is the case with ethical insights as well as with regard to the truth of God.

⁶ Levi-Strauss C.: *Race et Histoire*. Paris: Éditions Gonthier; 1961. p. 73. Translation Ingeborg Gabriel.

In the monotheistic religions which are also called religions of the book, i. e. of the word, dialogue *per definitionem* plays a central role. God created the universe by His Word. The biblical narratives present this in various forms originating from different ages (*Genesis* 1-2). For Christian faith, the importance of the word is furthermore accentuated in that Jesus Christ is called the Word of God (*John* 1:1). This centrality of the word in the monotheistic creeds has as its consequence a high esteem for language and reason as essential characteristics of human existence. If God orients, inspires and admonishes the faithful through His words this at the same time confers a special status on human words. Divine communication *dia-logou* thus constitutes, albeit in an analogous way, the theological basis for an understanding of the importance and creative potential of human words which are more than a mere communication of facts.

Any dialogue has ethical presuppositions. The most important are (1) the recognition of the other as equal; (2) the respect for him or her and his/her religious convictions; (3) a sense of gratitude since the other's insights contribute to one's own search for truth.⁷ These are attitudes which do not come by themselves but demand continuous practice. Experience thereby shows that in those fields where humans are particularly vulnerable, since they touch the deepest layers of their being, as are religious beliefs and ethical convictions, well-meaning respect is of greatest importance. Dialogue on ethical and religious issues thus requires a particularly high degree of intellectual as well as moral subtlety. At the same time, however, such dialogues create particularly strong bonds, the word *religio* etymologically after all being derived from *religare* (to bind together). As experience shows, such bonding may take place also between believers of different faiths. A personal anecdote to demonstrate this: Some time ago in an interreligious encounter a Muslim scholar said en passant that the Quran should always be placed on a high place in the room and no other books should be piled upon it. I made it a personal habit with the Bible, and even after decades I remember his reverential attitude towards the holy scripture. Interreligious dialogues can thus nourish gratitude vis-a-vis the other because of insights gained from other traditions.

These and similar stories show that interreligious encounters can and indeed do positively influence religious practice and a serious search for religious truth. Distinct identities and dialogue are thus not opposed to each other. They rather go hand in hand. As Albert Camus once remarked: "Dialogue is possible only between people who remain who they are and who speak the truth (they believe in)." His word points to the fact that dialogues require firm convictions, religious and other, as well as the acknowledgment that these are in a permanent process of evolution under conditions of human contingency. It is this tension between our identities with their convictions and our human limits with regard to their in-depth understanding that lies at the basis of dialogue. Religions shape strong identities, but as finite beings we can never comprehend God in His infiniteness. God remains a supreme mystery transcending words and human knowledge by far. Any form of religious or theological language therefore is by far more inadequate in divine matters than it is adequate. This simple and profound insight should immunize

⁷ These criteria partly overlap with Cornille C. Conditions for Inter-Religious Dialogue, in: Cornille C. editor. *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Interreligious Dialogue*. Oxford: John Wiley & Sons; 2013. p. 20-33. More extensively: Cornille C. *The Im-Possibility of Inter-Religious Dialogue*, New York: Herder & Herder Book; 2008.

against any positivistic often termed fundamentalist understanding of religion as against a theological language, which makes of God an object within our reach. Dialogue thus does not relativize religious truth. It rather raises our awareness with regard to the ineluctable tension between our language and the transcendental realities we speak of. There would be by far fewer religious conflicts, had people kept in mind that our ignorance in divine matters by far exceeds our knowledge.⁸

Dialogue is possible only between people who remain who they are and who speak the truth (they believe in).
Dijalog je moguć samo između ljudi koji ostaju takvi kakvi jesu i koji govore istinu (u koju vjeruju).

⁸ This refers to the wording found in a document of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) of the Catholic Church, cf. Denzinger H.: *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*. Editor Peter Hünermann; 37th edition; no. 806; Freiburg: Herder; 1991, p. 361.

2. The Difference between Religious Beliefs and Religious Ethics: Its Consequence for Interreligious Dialogues

at the beginning of my lectures on ethics, I usually tell a Jewish midrash about two rabbis who debate whether it was good that God created the world or not. Yes, says the one, look at all the marvels: sunrises and sunsets, the sea and woods, large and small creatures, and the wonderful moments in life. No, the other insists, don't you see the pain and senseless destruction: floods and earthquakes, animals devouring each other, and man being worse than all, sickness and death. When they paused, one of them said: Since it is so that God has created the world, man should reflect on his actions and take responsibility for them. The tale mirrors the importance of ethics in all monotheistic religions, confirmed by the sheer quantity of writings on ethical subjects throughout history. Changing life situations, technological progress and new insights demand today ever more differentiated responses so as to guide the actions of believers to act rightly before God and do justice to their fellow humans.

In the following it shall be argued that theological reasoning proper, i. e. the reflection on the truths pertaining to God and the Divine, and ethical reflections pertain to different forms of rationality. Whereas theological rationality proper is open for reflection but not for interreligious debate, this is indeed the case with ethics.⁹ It is this hypothesis which I want to take a closer look at.

To each religion pertain a set of particular creeds (and cult) and ethical codes. But whereas beliefs are mutually exclusive ethical norms and virtues must not be regarded so in the same way.¹⁰ That exclusivity is a feature of religious beliefs can easily be demonstrated. Mono-theists are no a-theists. Those who believe in the Quran as God's final word to Mohammed do not consider the New Testament their Holy Scripture and Jesus the Anointed Son of God as well as vice-versa. The same holds true for Jews. The list of exclusive religious beliefs can easily be expanded. It shows, as does everyday experience, that religious identities with regard to fundamental creeds are distinct. The consequence for interreligious dialogues on these religious beliefs is clear. We can learn about them, understand how those for whom they are normative understand them, pay respect to them as well as the liturgical practices associated with them and in the best case mutually learn from them. The aim of interreligious dialogues on creeds is certainly not to create a syncretistic and artificial religious Esperanto.

As reflection and experience show, however, interreligious dialogue on ethics and norms, follow a different pattern of rationality. Ethical norms, virtues and role models are not in the same way mutually exclusive. They are rather open to processes of interpretation and re-interpretation as well as to debate. As any overview over the literature on ethics and law shows, there exists a considerable "overlapping consensus" in all religions, which obviously is not

⁹ Thus Aristotle argues that it would be meaningless to expect the same exactness from ethics as from mathematics, cf. Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. 1094b-1095a11.

¹⁰ Exclusivity must not be confounded with the much-debated normative notion of religious exclusivism, cf. Stosch K von. *Komparative Theologie als Wegweiser in der Welt der Religionen*. Paderborn: Schöningh; 2012. Particularly p. 62-87.:

the case with regard to religious beliefs. With regard to the monotheistic religions where central norms are found in the sacred texts, these as well as virtues, values and role models have always been subject to ethical reasoning. Different schools on theology, ethics and law in Judaism, Christianity as well as in Islam struggled with a wide range of moral issues and gave diverse answers over the ages.

This epistemological difference derives from the difference in the “objects” treated: Whereas theological reflection focusses on God and His revelation and is rooted in mystical experience ethics and law have as their object human deeds, laws and social institutions. Even if the latter are based on a particular revelation and/or particular traditions, they form part of common human experience. They thus may be understood by others, be they of the same or another religious tradition or non-religious, because they share the same moral experience embedded in everyday life. To give one example. The Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, starts out with the revelation of God on Mount Sinai for the Israelites. The first three commandments are specific to this people, the following seven, however, contain universal ethical codes: To respect one’s parents, refrain from manslaughter, adultery and theft, not to lie or desire others’ property — these norms can be found in ethical traditions all over the globe and are, despite variations in detail, thus universal. How should I act towards my neighbour, mother, father, children? How can I do justice to those who are strangers? Which laws are just and serve peace so as to create a decent society? All these questions are asked by people everywhere and are also subject to human reasoning. Also if considered to be revealed they form part of a human practice that has universal features. They may thus even become a source of wisdom for other peoples, as the biblical book of Deuteronomy says (cf. *Deuteronomy* 4:8). Religious texts on ethics and law as well as their interpretation thus aim at a praxis constantly to be improved through new insights we can acquire from people inside but also outside our own community.¹¹ This holds true for religiously as well as non-religiously founded philosophical ethics.

The reasons for the high degree of convergence of norms, rules and virtues in monotheistic religions are manifold. Three points are to be stressed in particular:

Firstly, the anthropology of the monotheistic religions, shows remarkable similarities.¹² Humans are believed to be endowed with special dignity and responsibility, because of their relation to God, their creator. Humans are to govern the earth being made in His *image* (*Genesis* 1:27f). The Hebrew term *šelem* originally denotes a statue representing the king at the central square of Oriental cities. In an analogous way, humans are God’s representatives on earth. From this, further anthropological characteristics are derived in Jewish as well as in Christian theology. The Quranic notion of humans as God’s *khalif* carries a similar message (*Sura* 38:26).¹³ In view of present debates on

¹¹ Thus, Aristotle writes: “The part of philosophy with which we are dealing now is not merely theoretical, like the others. We reflect not only to know what is ethically good but also to become good persons. Otherwise this reflection would be useless”, in: Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. II 2: 1103b. Translation Ingeborg Gabriel.

¹² Asian religions affirm the divine in the human person in different ways, whereby here the divide between humans and the non-human creation is fluid. The reason is the belief in reincarnation leading to another view of the person, cf. George Ch.: *Der Mensch im Wesenskreislauf*, in: Bsteh A et al. editors. *Der Hinduismus als Anfrage an christliche Theologie und Philosophie (Studien zur Religionstheologie 3)*. Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel; 1997. p. 279-289.

¹³ Cf. Wielandt R. *Man and His Ranking in the Creation: On the Fundamental Understanding of Islamic Anthropology*, in: Bsteh A et

ecological ethics it must be added that this belief in a special status of humans is by no means seen as a cause for pride or arbitrary rule over nature but for responsibility towards creation.¹⁴

Secondly, the responsibility of each and every individual believer before God constitutes a central creed of monotheistic religions. It leads to a close interrelatedness of faith and ethics. The Jewish Talmud, Islamic debates on sharia, as well as Christian theological ethics contain intensive debates on a large variety of ethical and legal issues. These intellectual efforts show the high degree of relevance attributed to right actions. The reason for this is *inter alia* that belief in divine judgement at the end of life makes it a matter of central importance how we lead our earthly lives. Thereby, the individual believer will be judged not (only) according to his/her faith but according to his/her deeds in this world. This is summed up in the words of the prophet Micah at the end of the Old Testament: "You have been told, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do the right and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God" (*Micah* 6:8). According to Christian faith salvation and eternal life depends on the compliance with the law of love towards all humans and particularly the poor, in whom Christ Himself is seen as being present, as the narrative of the Last Judgement ascertains (*Matthew* 25:36-43). The belief in God as the supreme and ultimate judge, though it sometimes has been abused, should be understood as a strong resource to enhance human responsibility and ethical behaviour.¹⁵ Religious ethics should thus enable the faithful to act righteously before God under changing political and private circumstances and thus further human life.

Thirdly: Ethical insights even if rooted in religious traditions transgress cultural and religious contexts and are in this sense universal. The Jewish-American social philosopher Michael Walzer illustrates this with a scene: When on TV we see people in the streets of country x carrying signs with inscription as "Truth", "Freedom" or "Justice" we can guess what they are demonstrating for, respectively against. We do not know, however, what their exact demands are since we are not familiar with the particular political and social setting.¹⁶ To effectively contribute to the debate we would need to get in contact with them and learn about their concrete grievances and the cultural setting they are in. The same holds true for ethical texts from Holy Scriptures. If the traditions we come from are similar and have been in contact with each other over longer periods of time, we are better equipped to understand the others. Thus the ethics of Greece (Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics) have been a common ground ever since antiquity in the Mediterranean world and can thus constitute a bridge between the ethics of monotheistic faith traditions.

However, even beyond this cultural context, the norms, values, and virtues of all cultures of humanity do show a considerable degree of commonality on what is regarded as good and just. This may be attributed to the fact that

al. editors. *Islam Questioning Christianity*, Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel; 2007. p. 75-107. Seldcuk M and Heinzmann R et al. editors. *Menschenwürde: Grundlagen im Islam und Christentum (German and Turkish)*. Ankara: Üniversitesi Basimevi; 2006.

¹⁴ Cf. Gabriel IG.: **Christliche Umweltspiritualität als Antwort auf die Umweltkrise**, in: Kirloskar-Steinbach M and Diaconu M editors. *Environmental Ethics and Cross-Cultural Explorations*. München: Alber Verlag; 2020. p. 58-78.

¹⁵ Divine judgement as the source of human responsibility has, as far as I see, hardly been reflected in the theology of religion and interreligious dialogue. For a marginal reference see Dupuis J. *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*. New York: Maryknoll; 1997. p. 321-326. And in Islam Nagel T. *Geschichte der islamischen Theologie – Von Mohammed bis zur Gegenwart*. München: Beck; 1994. p. 31-38. Its importance in early Christian history has been documented by the historian Brown P. *The Ransom of the Soul. Afterlife and Wealth in Early Western Christianity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; 2015.

¹⁶ Cf. Walzer M. *Thick and Thin. Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press; 1994. p. 1.

the physical, psychological and social characteristics of men and women are similar even if shaped by different cultural traditions. Human beings everywhere and at all times have certain physical and metaphysical needs, which include food, shelter and clothing, a humane environment in which they can develop their personalities, freedom to participate in and contribute to the life of their political and religious communities. They need peace and justice as well as respect and acknowledgement. Basic ethical notions, which further these aims, such as truthfulness, kindness and compassion are therefore everywhere and at all times regarded as socially desirable. It would even be impossible to ground a society on the opposite attitudes as are injustice, violence, and enmity. Such a society would not only be inhumane, it would be unable to thrive and it would not survive for long. The norms, virtues and values humans are to observe, are thus by no means arbitrary.¹⁷ As history shows there has been, moreover, an ongoing process of ethical debates that led to an evolution in the field of moral reasoning and human practice. Changes in the status of women, the abolition of slavery and the prohibition and condemnation of torture, the fight against poverty and the struggle for social equality are last but not least the fruit of such reasoning and engagement, albeit because of human freedom regressions always remain possible. Within different religious traditions such an evolution is also supported by the fact that religious norm systems are not monolithic. Different schools of thought compete for better insights through the interpretation and re-interpretation of religious texts on ethics and law.¹⁸ This long-term process not only brings about a wealth of insights, it should also aim at finding ever more humane solutions, which are in agreement with God's will for humanity.¹⁹

Such developments can be observed already in biblical scriptures. Thus, the most fundamental ethical question which regards the use of violence undergoes several innerbiblical transformations, similar to those in other religions and philosophical traditions. The first stage is represented by a certain Lamech, a son of Cain, the son of Adam. His response to the violence inflicted on him is to retort with even greater violence. Not without pride, he thus states: "I have killed a man for wounding me, a boy for bruising me. When Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold" (*Genesis* 4:23f). This disproportionate retribution may seem archaic and out of date. Any closer look at political and social realities shows, however, that deterrence through an increase violence remains a widely used means. Pre-emptive strikes against enemies, brutality against a person as to gain an edge over one's opponents continue to be practiced over and over again. Excessive violence can terrorize people and quench any political or personal resistance in the bud. A second form to respond to violence is proportionate retribution according to the principle of the talion which can be found in legal systems throughout the world.

¹⁷ Postmodern positions put into question this modern universalism regarding norms and values as purely historical and arbitrary. This necessarily leads to a decisionistic approach, e. g. McIntyre A. *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*. (2nd Edition); London: Duckworth; 1987.

¹⁸ For this hermeneutical approach cf. Gabriel IG. *Truth in Earthen Vessels. Reflections on Contextuality*, in: *The Journal of Eastern Christian Studies*. (editors Assad Elias Kattan and Radu Preda) Vol. 69, 2017. p. 357-372. Bsteh A and Mirdamadi SA editors. Hermeneutik. Thema der 4. Iranisch-Österreichischen Konferenz. Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel; 2010. Online under <https://se-ktf.univie.ac.at/forschung/christlich-muslimischer-dialog> Accessed on 10.3.2021.

¹⁹ With regard to the role of law in the monotheistic religions, cf. Brague R. *The Law of God. The Philosophical History of an Idea*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 2007. With regard to Christianity cf. Korff W and Vogt M editors. *Gliederungssysteme angewandter Ethik – Ein Handbuch*. Freiburg: Herder Verlag; 2016.

... The age old wisdom of ethical reflection in diverse religious schools can further interpretations fitting for present times.

... Stoljetna mudrost etičkog promišljanja u raznim vjerskim školama može dalje interpretirati primjerenost današnjem vremenu.

In the Hebrew Bible it is paradigmatically formulated as: “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” (*Exodus* 21:23f *et alia*). The original aim of this was to curtail disproportional violence through a measured response with regard to the harms inflicted.²⁰ However, in legal systems later on this idea was given up since it was understood that also the principle of talion has undesirable and inhuman consequence and perpetuates violence. This poses the question whether there are still other ways to respond to violence. The double solution found by humanity is on the one hand to curtail violence through laws which apply as little violence as possible and to mitigate violence as a social evil with destructive consequences by refraining from counter-violence, so as to interrupt the spiral of violence. The question how humans can respond to violence so as not increase the existing evil can be found already in Greek philosophy as well as in many religious texts. This constitutes a considerable moral progress compared to the earlier positions. The call to peace and non-retribution in the so called beatitudes of the New Testament (*Matthew* 5-7) is an expression of this aim to curb violence. That non-violence can even bring about political change has been demonstrated by the movements of non-violence of the 20th century starting with Mahatma Gandhi who had been inspired by Hindu texts as well as by the Sermon on the Mount, which is a prominent example of ethical cross-fertilization between religious traditions. Though violence cannot be avoided at all times under contingent human conditions, the desirability of the reduction of violence can be comprehended by all humans independent of their religious affiliations. Thus, the insight that violence is a moral evil is universal as are the norms in all religions to reduce the harm inflicted on others.

²⁰ Cf. Berman HJ. *Law and Revolution – The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press; 1983.

It is these fundamentally human questions that need to be reflected in interreligious dialogues. Their aim should be to better understand the human condition and to establish an ethical consensus on core issues that furthers peace and love. The age old wisdom of ethical reflection in diverse religious schools can further interpretations fitting for present times. Though such dialogues are challenging, last but not least because of political and religious polarizations, they carry the potential to ease tensions and form the basis of a new consensus on the national as well as on the global level.

At the end of this I want to cite an initiative which demonstrates the theoretical point made. In December 2012 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) organized a large international conference to bring into contact religiously motivated grass root networks for refugees and migrants with the UN organizations. The aim was to coordinate efforts and strategies on this important ethical topic and render more effective the aid for refugees worldwide. I sat between a Buddhist monk from Thailand and a Pashtun Muslim leader from Pakistan, both active in the field of care for refugees in their particular countries and religious communities.²¹ It is such activities inspired by faith communities, which verify the main hypothesis of this paper, that ethical convictions, whether founded on religious teachings or not, are basically inclusive. They can be discussed, practiced, and also imitated by humans from all faith traditions as well as those with secular world views because they aim at a better life for all.

... Basic ethical notions, which further these aims, such as truthfulness, kindness and compassion are therefore everywhere and at all times regarded as socially desirable.

... Osnovni etički pojmovi, koji promoviraju ove ciljeve, kao što su istinitost, dobrota i suosjećanje, stoga se svugdje i u svakom trenutku smatraju društveno poželjnim.

²¹ Cf. <https://www.unhcr.org/524ac7fd9.pdf> Accessed on 11.3.2021.

3. From the Declaration *Nostra aetate* to the Document on Human Fraternity: The Catholic Church and Her Engagement in Interreligious Dialogue

As is known, at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) with the Declaration on Non-Christian Religions *Nostra aetate* the Roman Catholic Church published a seminal document which laid the basis for interreligious dialogue. Its main idea and message is that religions are called to recognize whatever is good in the others teachings and practice and work together for the common good, be it national or global.²² This is of particular urgency in an age of global interconnectedness. The declaration thus overcomes age old tendencies to condemn and judge other religions in a quasi-Manichean manner as *per se* negative and to exclude their believers as well as non-believers from the possibility of eternal salvation. *Nostra aetate* constitutes a large step forward for the Catholic Church as well as a striking example that the pluriformity of traditions within a certain religion carries the potential for new interpretations and can lead to profound changes and a deeper theological insights in God's visions for the world.²³ Even though humans have a very fragmentary grasp of divine plans, insights which assume that God wills the good of all humans are in concordance with the belief of all monotheistic traditions, which profess that He is merciful and supreme goodness Himself. They thus are not, as secular and also religious contemporaries sometimes tend to suspect, an opportunistic adaptation to the *Zeitgeist* or lead to the erosion of faith traditions.

The ecclesial consequences of *Nostra aetate* were considerable. The document brought forth a wealth of interfaith initiatives by Catholic and other institutions worldwide also on ethical issues.²⁴ During the pontificate of the present Pope Francis (2013-) interreligious dialogue as an instrument of peace and cooperation has been put high on the agenda of the Catholic Church. One of the most significant developments is an enhanced cooperation with Muslim leaders, particularly on ethical issues. The probably most prominent document of these endeavours is the Declaration on Human Fraternity signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad al-Tayyeb, at the occasion of the Pope's visit to the United Arab Emirates on February 4th 2019.²⁵ The richness of this short document would merit a thorough theological and ethical analysis. Here a few remarks must suffice.

²² Of the many publications on the document the following two are to be mentioned: *Nostra aetate* In our Time – Interreligious relations 50 years after the Second Vatican Council. Published by KAICIID Dialogue Center, Leister: Tudor Rose 2016. Renz A. Die katholische Kirche und der interreligiöse Dialog – 50 Jahre “Nostra aetate” – Vorgeschichte, Kommentar, Rezeption. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer; 2014.

²³ Cf. Dupuis J. *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books; 1997. Though a lot of literature has appeared since then this book still gives the best overview.

²⁴ One of them was the Vienna Dialogue Initiative (VDI) starting in the 1980's is to be mentioned. It started with conferences, reflecting on Christianity's relationship with Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism as academic encounters which were aimed at deepening the understanding of the respective faith traditions, the concept thus being dialogical from the very beginning. The following Vienna Christian-Muslim Round Table (VICIRoTa) was the organized biannually on topics of anthropology and global ethics. Publications are available in English, Arabic, Urdu, and partly in Farsi online under <https://se-ktf.univie.ac.at/forschung/christlich-muslimischer-dialog/> Accessed on 14.3.2021, for the story of this interreligious dialogue initiative; for details Gabriel IG. Like Rosewater. Reflections on Interreligious Dialogue, in: *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (winter 2010) 1-23. At p. 4-10.

²⁵ The day has been declared the International Day on Human Fraternity featuring yearly celebrations. Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LxbYeaG2rV4> for the 2021 celebration, Accessed on 14.3.2021.

... „In the name of God and of everything stated thus far; Al-Azhar al-Sharif and the Muslims of the East and West, together with the Catholic Church and the Catholics of the East and West, declare the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard.“

... „U ime Boga i svega do sada navedenog; Al-Azhar al-Sharif i muslimani Istoka i Zapada, zajedno s Katoličkom crkvom i katolicima Istoka i Zapada, proglašavaju usvajanje kulture dijaloga kao put; međusobnu saradnju kao kodeks ponašanja; uzajamno razumijevanje kao metod i standard.“

On Human Fraternity focusses on an approach to interreligious communication and dialogue which puts ethical issues at the centre. It regards it as an important means to create fraternal relations between humans, religious communities and peoples worldwide, particularly between Muslim and Christian believers. The introductory passage that encapsulates its basic intention is to be cited here in full:

Faith leads a believer to see in the other a brother or sister to be supported and loved. Through faith in God, who has created the universe, creatures and all human beings (equal on account of his mercy), believers are called to express this human fraternity by safeguarding creation and the entire universe and supporting all persons, especially the poorest and those most in need.²⁶

According to the signatories of the document this attitude constitutes the basis for cooperation between religions. The preamble then names those groups of humans which are particularly afflicted by social and political ills and pleads for an enhanced effort to better their lot. The way to this is a culture of dialogue and cooperation of the two major world religions:

“In the name of God and of everything stated thus far; Al-Azhar al-Sharif and the Muslims of the East and West, together with the Catholic Church and the Catholics of the East and West, declare the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard.”²⁷

Those who believe in a good and merciful God cannot, but out of ignorance, wish the suffering of fellow humans, their being subjected to violence or having to lead a life in misery. Such positions are not justifiable from a human point of view, they also decrease the credibility of religions and thus dishonour God. The text affirms that the final judgement means first and foremost a call to “religious and moral” responsibility. It affirms social and freedom rights, equality before the law, and the rights of women and men and women of other faith traditions on the basis of equal citizenship that does not discriminate against any group. It considers ethical values as “anchors of salvation for all” and affirms the common responsibility of Christians and Muslims to strengthen spiritual values in the contemporary world, standing up against any form of “religious extremism, national extremism and also intolerance [...]”, reinforcing “the bond of fundamental human rights in order to help ensure a dignified life for all the men and women of East and West, avoiding the politics of double standards”. Life is sacred because it is given by God, each believer therefore feels shame and pain if violence is inflicted in the name of God. “These tragic realities” – the text states – “are the consequence of a deviation from religious teachings” a misuse of religion having “nothing to do with the truth of religion”.

²⁶ http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html Accessed on 14.3.2021.

²⁷ http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html Accessed on 14.3.2021.

Veliki imam Al-Azhara Ahmad al-Tayyeb i papa Franjo.
Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad al-Tayyeb and pope Francis.

The final affirmation centres once more on ethics and dialogue: “Dialogue among believers means coming together in the vast space of spiritual, human and shared social values and, from here, transmitting the highest moral virtues that religions aim for” which so can become a source of cultural and religious enrichment for all. They bear “witness to the greatness of faith in God that unites divided hearts and elevates the human soul.” The Document on *Human Fraternity* has been complemented by the papal encyclical *Fratelli tutti* (October 2020),²⁸ which explicitly refers to it and takes up its themes. It has also been cited frequently by Pope Francis in his speeches on the occasion of his visit to Iraq (5-8th March 2021).

The call for an alliance of believers “to unite and work together so that it may serve as a guide for future generations to advance a culture of mutual respect in the awareness of the great divine grace that makes all human beings brothers and sisters” are more urgently needed than ever. Even though global political tensions do not have as their only cause religious frictions, during the past decades, religions have increasingly become identity markers contributing to polarizations within nations and between them. This makes dialogues sometimes more difficult, since they cut across these new rifts and go against political interests. At the same time, they can become important tools for peace and understanding as high and sublime religious values and encourage the deepening of religious ties. It would be naïve to think that age old divisions can be overcome in a short time. But a consensus on norms, rules, and virtues as well as practical cooperation of the believers of the world religions where human life is at risk can be a powerful counterforce against or in a “third world war being fought piecemeal”. Its theological foundation will be the firm belief in the goodness of God who wants human beings to flourish and to support each other in their sufferings. In all faith traditions there are people, men and women, who struggle to improve the relationship between religious communities and further the common good through common action. This is a sign of hope and strengthens the belief in a merciful God whose goodness by far surpassing human goodness is to guide human behaviour.

Growing religious pluralism, and globalization and secularization constitute huge challenges for societies worldwide as well as for religions. In an interdependent world, religiously homogeneous societies are doubtlessly a thing of the past. Therefore, dialogues on ethical as well as on legal norms as the basis of national life are needed more than ever so as to overcome religious and political tensions, repression and violence and realize peace, which constitutes a supreme value in all religions.²⁹ This asks for interreligious reflections on an ethics that furthers the life of all humans and strengthens social trust. In this sense we are indeed all sitting in one boat.

²⁸ http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html Accessed 4.3.2021.

²⁹ For the relationship between law in faith traditions cf. Gabriel IG. *Ethik des Politischen – Grundlagen Prinzipien Konkretionen*. Würzburg: Echter; 2020. p. 66-79.

Interreligious
reflections on ethics
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Međureligijska razmišljanja o etici koja unapređuje
život svih ljudi jača socijalno povjerenje. U tom smislu
doista svi sjedimo u jednom čamcu.

MEHMED A. AKŠAMIJA,
Ornament XIb, 2000.

MEHMED A. AKŠAMIJA,
Ornament XIb, 2000.