

Inter Religious Tolerance and Peaceful co-existence in Ethiopia

Your excellence Dr. Shiferaw T/Mariam, Minister of Federal Affairs.

Honorable religious fathers

Dear Ambassadors and Head of Diplomatic Missions

Honorable Guests and Dear Participants

It is a privilege and an honor for me to address this second Dialogue African Forum representing the Inter Religious Council of Ethiopia on behalf of Archbishop Abune Gebreal, the Chairman of the Council, who could not appear at this occasion due to pre scheduled commitments.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Historically, religion has been among the most powerful agents for changing human attitudes and behavior. Religion has traditionally defined what it means to be human, and it has defined the nature of our goals and relationships.

The Horn of Africa and the Red Sea region have been in perpetual conflict for decades. For geo-political and economic reasons, conflicts in these areas tend to affect the rest of the world. According to some scholars, though the region is full of conflicts, there is still a potential for harmony among the people of the Horn and the Red Sea regions. The majority of people of these areas are all members of Afro-Asiatic language group. Moreover, as adherents of the three monotheist religions, the majority of these peoples share important values like strong tradition of respect for teachers of all religion.

Most scholars agree that Ethiopia is a unique country in terms of inter-religious relations. Relations, especially between Arabs and Abyssinians in trade, culture and religion reach back to ancient times. With the introduction of Judaism into Ethiopia, monotheism started to influence both regions. The introduction of Christianity into Ethiopia further advanced this process. Yet, another religion that

stood in line with other monotheistic religions came with Islam. All these religions came to Ethiopia and co-existed in mutual relationship with one another. This has made Ethiopia a unique place for all types of encounters, including peaceful relations, respect and tolerance, in exchange of ideas and practices.

Ethiopia is one of a few countries mentioned by name in the scriptures. For instance, in the Psalms of David; there is a verse which reads “Ethiopia shall raise her hands unto the Lord.” In a similar way, Prophet Mohammed ordered his persecuted followers to seek refuge in Ethiopia- a land of justice. They were indeed received with dignity and given protection. These are instances showing the uniqueness of Ethiopia. Thus, Ethiopia was known since ancient times as a land of peace and religious tolerance.

Coming to our current time, adding to the long-standing heritage of peaceful co-existence, the question of religious freedom and equality has been further guaranteed by the 1995 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The existence of this constitutional guarantee has created even greater opportunities for religious institutions in Ethiopia to work together. The principle of equality fully acknowledges the differences between various religious tenets and accords legal protection.

Religious tolerance takes it one step further and puts forward that the different religions should live in harmony with each other, accepting and allowing for religious diversity, to the extent of working together for common goals. It is a deep appreciation of the rich diversity of our cultures, our forms of expressions and ways of being human. Therefore, tolerance is harmony in difference. As long as incompatibilities exist, we have to enter into an agreement to solve our problems by peaceful means. As a diverse society, we have to continue the process of going towards a shared future. Such a process should be inclusive, broad and deep and will certainly demand some shifts in our attitudes, behaviors, aspirations, and even beliefs. Although it is a long journey that takes time and energy, with no quick fix solution, it is worth while to commit to such a great endeavor.

Ethiopia is in a process of social change and the faith communities play a great role both in the spiritual and development aspects to effect the change. Two factors are central to contribute to the ongoing change in terms of human and financial resources. Particular attention has to be given to capacity building programs of faith institutions and prioritization of key people (religious leaders) who could be better equipped as agents of change through their teachings and leadership in churches and mosques. Faith communities have a moral obligation to accept and execute peace-promoting programs based on their faith values and cultural heritage.

Therefore, religious institutions have a unique role in influencing and disseminating relevant and timely information to their respective communities and also lifting up the needs and concerns of their followers and relevant stakeholders.

This indicates that faith communities play the role of bridging the information gap between the faith communities and policy makers. Moreover, this will eventually pave the way to address lack of participation, protection and equality. Another added value is the power and strength of religious institutions to mobilize their followers through faith structures that stretches from federal level to the grass roots. Based on the moral values of faith communities, the youth should be given primary attention so that their youthful energy and potential can be used for constructive aims. For our youth to become instruments of change, they have to be properly mobilized and organized so that they can resist negative external and internal influences and preserve –and even further invigorate –our Ethiopian heritage of peace and tolerance. Maintaining our heritage, while also progressing in development terms, is a critical element in the positive image-building of this great nation.

In view of the above, to proceed with the ongoing social change, each development actor has to play its role in a way that speeds up the change that we would like to see and promote inter-religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence. The Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia envisions to see a developed Ethiopia with religious freedom and equality based on peace, love, tolerance and

mutual benefit. To achieve this, the Council has its structure from the federal level down to grass roots, with direct access to every church and mosque at local levels. This creates conducive atmosphere and fertile ground to address any concerns efficiently and effectively.

According to Executive Secretary of the Abuja National Mosque Management Board and Inter Religious Ambassador, Alhaji Ibrahim Abubaker Jega, a call was made to establish World Inter Religious Council at the 5th Global Forum Vienna in 2013. The establishment of this Council is aimed at bridging the gap between policy-makers of UN member states and/or declarations across civilizations and religions. Alhaji Ibrahim further mentioned that “member states or representatives of religious councils (if created) would facilitate dissemination of all relevant UN Declarations and Resolutions to their religious organizations which will go down to all places of worship, schools and individual families with their respective domains and denominations”. This is also in line with the objectives of Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia that was established in November 2010 to foster understanding and to promote inter-faith dialogue across the religious spectrum. So far, IRCE has made great progress towards its aims and we will continue to work hard until we reach the finish line.

Opening the door for religious dialogue and exercising religious tolerance will move us to have a guarantee for peace and development. Every religion has to pay a particular attention to the golden rule that binds different faiths together for a common good. *“In everything, treat others as you would want them to treat you.”* This plainly indicates that mutual understanding and co-existence play a significant role in nation-building. This has to be advocated extensively and share experience with countries in Africa and beyond.

We, members of the Inter-religious Council of Ethiopia, feel very strongly that, more than ever before, the religions are called upon to demonstrate their commitment and responsibility in words and action and draw on the best resources the traditions have to offer to challenge the existing trends of violence and intolerance and contribute to peace and development of the nation. Therefore, it is in the spirit of compassion, mutual understanding and

commitment to peace, as inspired by our respective understanding of truth and by our common existence in all its diversities that we members of the family of Inter Religious Council of Ethiopia work towards that noble goal of peace and development. Further, we pledge to maintain our alliance and collaborations as we make efforts to make Ethiopia more tolerant and peaceful. We are sensitive to the particularities of the teachings of our respective religious traditions, and, at the same time, acknowledge our commonalities as well as our responsibility to build bridges among our religious communities across our region and beyond in the interest of peace and peaceful co-existence.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Before I leave the podium, I would like to express my appreciation and to extend my gratitude to Ethio-Turkish International School for organizing this grand occasion. Such occasions have a lot to contribute to the effort of Inter Religious Council of Ethiopia to strengthen the pre existing Inter- religious ties so as to promote peace and development in Ethiopia.

May Peace Prevail on Earth!

Thank you.