PART I

Setting a Context for Dialogue
Religions should meet where religions take their course, in God." This is the perspective of the reflections which I would like to share with you this evening. They are not meant to anticipate the theological content of this conference. They only wish to offer a theological starting point from which we might like our work to proceed.

In the Book of Genesis we read: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness’... So God created humankind in His image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he-created them” (1:26, 27). Thus the human person, created by God in His image, is created ‘capable of God’ (capax Dei), capable of living in the presence of God, capable of relationship with God and with other human beings, capable of divine revelation.

“In his goodness and wisdom, God chose to reveal Himself.” These words are taken from the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum) which, inspired by the Sacred Scriptures, elaborates on them saying: “Through this revelation... the invisible God, out of the abundance of His love, speaks to men as friends (cf. Exodus 33:11; John 15: 14–15) and lives among them.”

According to the Christian faith, God came to live among them in a most eminent way in His Son, the Eternal Word. This understanding is essential to our Christian identity but is not part of the religious faith of Jews or Muslims. Yet, I think that all who belong to what is called the great Abrahamic tradition, in the utmost respect of each other’s different faith identities, can stand together in recognizing in the One Almighty and Merciful God, a God Who has chosen to relate to us, to speak with
us, to seek us out when we hide from Him. As the Bible says, "They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?'" (Genesis 3:8–9).

God is a relating God indeed, and I believe that this is what He wants us to be too: relating people, people of dialogue with Him and with one another. Did the Lord God not ask Cain; after Cain had killed his brother Abel, "Where is your brother?" (Genesis 4:9). Are the questions that God asks Adam and Eve and Cain in the Bible not put to us as well? I believe they are. In my own life I have come to realize that I cannot truly answer God's question, "Where are you?" without answering the other question as well, "Where is your brother?" That is why interreligious dialogue, i.e., a genuine dialogue between persons of faith, seems imperative to me; it is the real reason that must underlie all other reasons (and good reasons at that) that may be linked to particular contexts, emergencies, or just good opportunities. But let me qualify this affirmation by affirming again that such a dialogue can only and truly take place between persons of informed faith, between people who know their religious tradition, are nourished by it, feel secure in it, and who, therefore, are able to respect the faith tradition, and the faith experience, of the other. The Second Vatican Council's Declaration Nostra Aetate aims precisely at that.

In number 3, referring to the Islamic religion, it says that "upon the Muslims, the Church looks with esteem," because "they adore God, living and enduring, merciful and all-powerful, Maker of heaven and earth and Speaker to men." It urges Muslims and Christians "to strive sincerely for mutual understanding," and "to make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace, and freedom."

In number 4, referring to the Jews and Judaism, Nostra Aetate states: "Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred Synod [i.e., the Second Vatican Council] wishes to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit above all of biblical and theological studies, and of brotherly dialogues."

And in number 5, Nostra Aetate concludes: "We cannot in truthfulness call upon that God who is the Father of all if we refuse to act in a brotherly way toward ... men. A man's relationship with God the Father, and his relationship with his brother men, are so linked together that
Scripture says: 'He who does not love does not know God' (1 John. 4:8).’ This teaching is binding for us. In a Catholic understanding, conciliar documents such as Nostra Aetate are held to be inspired by the Holy Spirit of God who, we believe, assists, illumines and, if need be corrects our processes of reflection and decision-making. If, therefore, according to our Catholic faith the Holy Spirit is behind Nostra Aetate, the teaching of this document is part of our obedient response to God; we cannot draw back from it. As Pope John Paul II has put it at the start of the World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi in October 1986, addressing persons of other faiths: “It is, in fact, my faith conviction which has made me turn to you.”

In November 1999, Cardinal Edward Cassidy, together with Rabbi Irving Greenberg, received the Nostra Aetate Award from the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding of Sacred Heart University. On that occasion he spoke on the subject “Dialogue in Our Time”—obviously in the context of Catholic-Jewish relations—and said: “We have traveled quite a long way together since Nostra Aetate was promulgated in 1965. We have built a completely new relationship between our communities, a solid relationship that will last, no matter what storms may come to try us or new obstacles obstruct our path.” And he quite correctly added: “Credit for this is due to members of both our communities: to the Catholic Church which in Nostra Aetate offered the hand of friendship, and the Jewish community, which despite its memory of past experiences, took that hand and began our common journey of reconciliation. Our success has been due to sincere dialogue.”

Looking back at the thirty-five years that have gone by since that common journey began, we must admit that it has not been an easy venture at all, but then, this is perhaps a reason for believing that the results will last. Unfortunately, not all who could have made a constructive contribution to it, whose positive participation could have made a difference, have shown the respect for the other that is essential for dialogue. However, all those who did—and some of them are here with us this evening—may give thanks to God for all the good that has happened with His help, while praying for the wisdom and the courage to move forward together, step by step and in the right direction, being aware that patience with one another, and, above all, deep respect for
one another, will illuminate our path, while suspicion or contempt will obscure it.

A sincere encounter between Christians and Jews, Jews and Muslims, Muslims and Christians, in fact, all of us who claim to belong to the Abrahamic tradition can be of benefit to ourselves, in the sense that it can teach us both pride in our own spiritual heritage and humility in the face of the spiritual heritage of the other. "By dialogue we let God be present in our midst; for as we open ourselves in dialogue to one another, we also open ourselves to God." It can also be, and will be, of benefit to those people and societies who no longer have room for God and, therefore, for people of faith in God, people who wish to live according to God's will. In fact, the erosion or the distortion of the religious values in some of our societies today do have a destructive effect on the respect for human life and human dignity, or on the respect for creation, which our religious traditions uphold. As Cardinal Cassidy has reminded us at an important meeting of Catholic and Jewish leadership in Prague, in 1990, "Let us not forget that . . . those who created the gas chambers and the gulags were atheists who, while denying the existence of God, acted as though they themselves were God." There is no reason to trust that also today or tomorrow, men and women without faith will not consider themselves equal to the God they deny. On the other hand, in some parts of our respective religious constituencies—Jewish, Christian, Muslim—there are people who in the name of religion and faith, and indeed in the name of God himself, do act as if they were God. Those people are not with us here this evening. They are not interested in dialogue. Is it not sad that their ways often become the public trademark for what religion is not?

3

A few years ago, I heard Daniel Rossing speak in Jerusalem about "the sacred space of dialogue." He spoke of the need to cleanse our hearts and minds before entering it. That is also what Pope John Paul II had in mind when he called upon the Catholic faithful—in his Apostolic Letter Tertio Millennio Adveniente published on November 10, 1994—to get ready for entering the third millennium in which, he hopes, people of faith, individually and together, will show "how religious belief inspires peace, encourages solidarity, promotes justice and upholds liberty." He told the two hundred participants from some fifty countries, and representing some twenty
different religious traditions, gathered in Vatican City October 25–28, 1999, "The task before us is to promote a culture of dialogue." This task will require, from those who wish to share the Holy Father's hope, a willingness to purify themselves of contempt, prejudice, perhaps of suspicion and lingering hurt. They will need to learn the respect for difference and the readiness to meet with one who might not so much be in their image, but who is, nonetheless, in the image of God. Indeed, is it not in meeting the other under the gaze of God that our perception of the other can change, thus creating within us and between us that 'sacred space' which enabled Jacob to turn to his brother Esau saying, "I have seen your face as one sees the face of God" (cf. Genesis 33:10), and felt blessed by it? Of course, such an understanding of the interfaith encounter might have theological implications which, I suspect, we have hardly begun to see. But, then, is this not part of our future agenda?

4

In this Conference we want to focus our attention specifically on the question, "What do we want the other to teach about us?" History has painfully shown how important this question is, and, I would say, how very important education is in this regard. Education is the master key which opens the door to that space in a person where the deepest aspirations and expectations move, the God-given depth which allows a person to give and to receive, to reach out and to be reached, to seek and to be found, to relate and to respond, to choose and to decide, to unify tensions, to overcome limitations, to integrate differences. It is the original space in a person which is really a religious space, tending toward self, toward another, toward one another, and ultimately toward the other. It is the space that allows me to realize that you are not me and I am not you, yet that it is in our mutual otherness that we can build relationship. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, has put it like this: "If I am I and you are you, we no longer threaten one another, for we each have our own blessing."5

This has not been an easy discovery, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks admits—"It took many years, it took a deep inner struggle; after it Jacob limped . . .," he said, but without the 35 years of interreligious relationships and dialogue (since the promulgation of Nostra Aetate) many of us may not have started the process of discovery yet.
Returning to the question, "What do we want the other to teach about us?" I think I should like to put it differently, namely, "How do we want the other to teach about us?" or, and this might even be a better way to put it, "What do we want the other to learn about us?" I know, of course, that with regard to the content, this Conference will deal with "what" each religion would like the other to teach about its key theological concepts. With regard to the "how" I would like to recall a meeting that took place in Rome in December, 1970 between our office and members of the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations. The meeting agreed on a Memorandum which was the first step for the creation of a kind of permanent forum for dialogue, an International Liaison Committee between the Catholic Church and the world Jewish Community. The meeting dealt with the same question we are dealing with, and the answer was: we need to present the other adequately, fairly, and respectfully, i.e., truthful to the manner in which the other understands and identifies him- or herself, "in order to further the understanding both of each other and of our common responsibility to humanity and the world."26

It is interesting to note that already at that early stage in Catholic-Jewish relations, the ultimate goal of the dialogue was perceived beyond the dialogue itself, namely in "a common search for a more harmonious and peaceful world."27 And reflecting on the interreligious dialogue between Muslims and Christians, at the General Audience on May 5, 1999, Pope John Paul II pointed in the same direction: "Interreligious dialogue which leads to a deeper knowledge and esteem for others is a great sign of hope" for the people in our secular societies, he said, concluding: "By walking together on the path of reconciliation . . . the two religions [Christianity and Islam] will be able to offer a sign of hope, radiating in the world the wisdom and mercy of that one God who created and governs the human family."

In fact, "let us not forget," Cardinal Francis Arinze told the representatives of the world's religions gathered in the Vatican in October of last year, "that religion is the soul of society; it is like leaven that can transform humanity."28 Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has put it even more strongly: [In today's society, and for its sake] "we must begin to restate the interreligious imperative in more forceful terms. We must see it not simply as a gesture of good will, undertaken by men and women of exceptional liberalism and
vision; but as a set of religious axioms that must be confronted by all believers. . . . What impels me to enter into the conversation with men and women of other faiths? If I can answer that question then I have provided an impetus to the interfaith encounter which goes beyond the mood of the moment, and reaches into the roots of faith." Such an approach which is a religious approach to interreligious dialogue (however strange the emphasis might sound!), will help to prevent it from becoming "interreligious opportunism," or from being hijacked by agendas that have little to do with religion and faith. Yet, that risk is real; we must look out for it.

This is why, in my opinion, point number one on the interreligious agenda must be the interreligious dialogue itself, namely the care and the concern for a respectful encounter between persons of faith, who, without blurring the differences between their respective religious faith experiences, and, indeed, their respective faith expectations, nevertheless are willing and able to relate their own faith experience to the faith experience of the other, willing to learn about it and, eventually, also from it. This first asks of them "patient listening, mutual trust, and honest sharing."8 It also asks of them their prayer.

Point number two on the interreligious agenda would then be the effort to seek together the common ground that people of faith have, the common values they share, enabling them to stand together against the evils of a godless world. As the participants of the Vatican 1999 Interreligious Assembly stated in their Message:

We are convinced that our religious traditions have the necessary resources to overcome the fragmentations which we observe in the world, and to foster mutual friendship and respect between peoples. We are aware that many tragic conflicts around the world are the result of the pragmatic but often unjust association of religions with nationalistic, political, economic or other interest. We are aware that if we do not fulfill our obligation to live out the highest ideals of our religious traditions, then we shall be held liable for the consequences. . . . We know that the problems in the world are so great that we cannot solve them alone. Therefore there is an urgent need for interreligious collaboration. . . . We appeal to religious leaders to promote the spirit of dialogue within their respective communities, and to be ready to engage in dialogue themselves.
with civil society... In the spirit of the Jubilee, we appeal to each one of us... to seek forgiveness for past wrongs, to promote reconciliation where the painful experiences of the past have brought divisiveness and hatred.

My friends, this message from the representatives of different religious traditions (Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and many others) from around the world is a message of hope, indeed. It corresponds to what Pope John Paul II had shared with them: “I have always believed that religious leaders have a vital role to play in nurturing that hope of justice and peace without which there will be no future worthy of humanity,” he said. He added, “Our hope rises not merely from the capacities of the human heart and mind... it has a divine dimension. Awareness that the Spirit of God works where he wills (cf. John 3:8)... evokes appreciation of what lies hidden in the hearts of others.” Our commitment must be to approach that reality, where the divine meets the human, with reverence; to enter that space with awe, for it is, indeed, sacred.

In May, 2000, a Jewish-Catholic conference will be held in London at the initiative of the leadership of Reform Judaism/Reform Synagogues of Great Britain. This Conference which will bring Jewish and Catholic scholars together, intends to explore “The Theology of Partnership.” Our Commission supports the initiative, as it also supports this conference sponsored by the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding, because we think that the idea of engaging in a theological dialogue at this point in our relationship is possible and necessary and is a sign of maturity.

Referring to Nostra Aetate’s recommendation in this regard, Pope John Paul II on April 19, 1985 addressed the Catholic and Jewish participants of a theological colloquium that took place at my university (the Angelicum) in Rome. He said: “Jews and Christians must get to know each other better. Not just superficially as people of different religions, merely coexisting in the same place, but as members of such religions which are so closely linked to one another. This implies that Christians try to know as exactly as possible the distinctive beliefs, religious practices, and spirituality of Jews, and conversely that Jews try to know the beliefs and practices and spirituality of Christians.”
The pope further developed this thought one year later when he received the participants of the second Angelicum Colloquium, on November 6, 1986. Although the specific context in which he spoke was again a gathering of Catholic and Jewish theologians, I believe that the development of his thought makes provision for including the three Abrahamic faith traditions:

Theological reflection is part of the proper response of human intelligence and so gives witness to our conscious acceptance of God's will. At the same time, the other human sciences, such as history, philosophy, and art, also offer their own contribution to an organic deepening of our faith. This is why ... [our] traditions have always had such high appreciation for religious study. Honoring our respective traditions, theological dialogue based on sincere esteem can contribute greatly to mutual knowledge of our respective patrimonies of faith and can help us to be more aware of our links with one another in terms of our understanding of salvation. . . .

Your colloquium can help to avoid the misunderstanding of syncretism, the confusion of one another's identities as believers, the shadow and suspicion of proselytism. This mutual effort will certainly deepen our common commitment to the building of justice and peace among all people, children of the one heavenly Father."

The Pope speaks about "mutual knowledge of our respective patrimonies of faith" and "our conscious acceptance of God's will." Is that mutual knowledge not a part of God's gift? I believe it is. I believe that it will help us to become witnesses to that gift in a secular world, as I also believe that "the strength of witness lies in the fact that it is shared."12

Notes

3. n. 2
Is There a Moral Imperative to Engage in Interfaith Dialogue?

Moving Away from Competition, Zero Sum Games, and Fear

We know that people come from multiple faiths. Historically, it was rarely the case that people spoke to each other in anything that could be termed "dialogue." Of course, sometimes they did not speak to each other at all. They engaged in hostile actions across borders, especially where religious ideology was partnered with the exercise of political or economic power. At other times there were verbal exchanges, but they were often hostile. Someone always seemed to be on the defensive—more disputation than dialogue.

The Enlightenment brought with it a critique of the role of religion and its supposed dangers and abuses of power. Although this critique was extreme at first, over the course of time it became a central way to understand the West, especially with the rise of increasingly secular economic, social, and political spheres. As a result, people are no longer beholden to triumphal views about their relationship with the world or with God. This has not been true for most of human history. Religious faith was very closely connected to economic power, ideological power, to political power and its control over territory. In fact, I believe it was too connected, and the stakes were too high. Some religious people may wish for the "good old days," but for most of us, the lowering of the stakes has freed us from a paradigm of fear. We were terrified to talk to each other because there was too much at stake.
The reasons for fear disappear when within the sphere of human life, one can actually have a conversation about important things without fear of reprisal. As this kind of dialogue takes place, it is much easier to put behind us a paradigm of fear. Additionally, if we do not need to be afraid of talking to each other, then we can also interact without fear of losing adherents to another religious or political group, and we do not have to fear that the entire community will unravel because people will come to believe things that they are not supposed to believe. Moving away from fear allows us to also move away from notions of competition where religious faith is a matter of a zero sum game—if they get someone, we lose; if they change their minds, we win.

After the Enlightenment, it is possible to engage in genuine interreligious dialogue. We now ask: is there a moral imperative to engage in such interreligious dialogue? Until now, it was not a viable possibility. There was too much fear and there was too much negative competition. Of course, we have to be sympathetic, I think, to the realities of what life was like then. But now that those realities have shifted, the question emerges whether or not one should engage in this kind of dialogue. The question has moved from the possibility of dialogue, to the degree—if any—of moral necessity or obligation. If so, what kind might that be and if not, why not?

Why are we asking this question? One of the forces fueling our interest in this question is that there has been much intellectual and social fluidity in religious matters, especially in the United States of America. People move in and out of their religious views quickly. As a result, many people with religious convictions sense that it is good to be talking to each other, if only to create some depth of conviction and stability of commitment. Many people rightly question the direction and integrity of religious faith when someone can get up on any given morning and say to himself or herself, “This Saturday or Sunday I think I’ll try a new denomination, and if I don’t like it, next week I’ll try something else.” Faith has a way of asking, where is the place of integrity in so fluid an approach? And so, if we are to talk together about important matters of faith, it has to be in a situation where the integrity of the participants and the dialogue is preserved.

I am not interesting in examining the moral imperative to get together and “make nice,” although I suppose that there is such a moral
imperative. Granted, if we live in the same place with other people, then we ought to get together and be civil and not hurt other people or persecute them. We all know this. But, let us examine a deeper question, one that has to do with more than self-preservation. This kind of dialogue would leave the integrity of faith positions intact and would not require them to be altered or neatly fit into categories or expressions simply because other people would be comfortable with them. We want to talk about dialogue as something which, in and of itself, shares in the Enlightenment tradition of tolerance, of accepting different positions, and of recognizing the value of the other. I am proposing such a direction and journey. Allow me to offer a brief picture of the itinerary.

First, what are the typical reasons offered for participating in interfaith dialogue? I will group them generally and then, focus more specifically on the scope an imperative could take. Second, what is the scope of the dialogue itself and how far ranging is it? Third, what are the paradigm positions and what do the arguments then look like?

If the question is asked, “Is there a moral imperative to do something?” the mere mention of the word “imperative” would make some people uncomfortable and question whether these interfaith issues comprise a discussion about morality. But our discussion must be broad enough so that it opens plenty of doors for the reader or for the listener to go through. In this sense, any imperative for dialogue must rely on choice and must be free. Once positions are laid out, what do the terms of the conversation look like? What kind of forces or agents should initiate this kind of dialogue? What pushes a moral imperative from theory into acted-upon reality? What would make such dialogue really work? I believe that if one discusses matters of moral obligation, there ought to be some discussion of what the institutionalization of those obligations would look like. That will, I suppose, bring us then to discuss what kinds of discourse or languages this kind of morally driven dialogue would employ.

There are many ways to come to interfaith dialogue in addition to the one I am proposing here. This particular direction is steered by the question, “is there a moral imperative?” Should more people engage in interfaith dialogue? There certainly are dialogues without an imperative. For example, is there a moral imperative to agree and engage in dialogue about the meaning of popular movies? I probably would lean more in the
direction of no. Certainly, there is no moral imperative to discuss differences in food tastes. But, our topic seems to be of a different order of things. I am asking whether or not interfaith dialogue is something one and all must do as part of one’s religious practice.

Amicable Relationships

In order to answer our question, allow me to summarize the kinds of rationales that have been suggested as reasons to engage in such dialogue. First, some say we engage in interfaith dialogue because we want to promote amicable relationships among groups. We want to avoid social hatred or doing damage to others and we want to promote forms of “social love,” mutual support, solidarity, a sense of mutual connection with citizens, and our joint responsibility toward each other. On this view, one might have a moral responsibility to engage in interreligious dialogue because it accomplishes something that other methods cannot accomplish. This reason or cluster of reasons would call for the kind of dialogue that has, as its end, a realized sense that we were in the same boat, that we were citizens, and as such, we could not divorce our religious identities from our citizenship and from our participation in civil society. And, since we can not separate our religious faith identities from our participation and also because it is a fundamental value of ours to have a civil society in which we are amicable toward each other and we do not hate each other, then at the very least, one could argue that we ought to be engaged in interfaith dialogue to make sure that we get along with each other, especially in contexts where coercion is inappropriate.

This is a minimalist perspective. It is similar to the dynamic that occurs when couples, after verbally or physically beating the daylights out of each other, show up in a therapist’s office and have conversations that help them resolve problems and deal with things. Afterwards, they have more amicable relations. I do not wish to make light of such situations, but this seems to be the minimum two people could expect from a marriage. Of course, this reason for interreligious dialogue is based on the premise that our faith commitments can not be put on the side when we enter into civic society or a political society. Since such beliefs can not simply be pushed aside, we are obligated to do something to see to it that
our social and political relationships connect our religious and faith identities in ways that are positive, amicable, and avoid hatred. In the end, if I understand you better, I am probably less likely to spread nasty rumors about you and burn down your house.

As an argument for interreligious dialogue, this first reason presents a thin case. I do not mean it is a poor case. It just does not get one very far. We could spend the whole evening talking to people and not understand them very well and not be able to report back anything we heard in any detail. But so what? We liked them because they were funny and interesting and they nodded when we spoke. At least at the end of our shared time we thought, "I could not possibly hurt a nice guy like that or his family and friends." Again I am not making light of this because social solidarity is a very important starting point.

A Second Reason: Learning About Others

Sometimes we engage in dialogue because it helps us to learn about others, promotes mutual understanding and helps us to see others more accurately, thus avoiding damaging stereotypes leading again to violence. This is our second group of arguments for an imperative to engage in dialogue. For some people, it would be enough to say that understanding the other better is a positive good in itself. Understanding can be seen as a manifestation of intellectual virtue, which we are morally obliged to cultivate.

Some may counter, "So what if I misunderstand you? I do not understand a lot of people and I do not understand everything. What do we really know anyway?" I suggest that the abdication of a responsibility to understand other people can lead to the dissolution of social responsibility. Ignorance is devastating in its ability to impel people to act violently. People react and respond in damaging ways when they do not understand the other. If a person is convinced that you believe in a strange and terrible doctrine, then you will be perceived as a danger to society and he or she is going to do something to prevent you from acting on such a belief. On the other hand, if dialogue occurs, false and pernicious stereotypes no longer satisfy the participants. In sum, there are really two reasons. Either one thinks that understanding others is in and of itself
intrinsically good, and therefore, something that one is morally obligated to pursue in some way; or one thinks that even if it is not intrinsically good, it is instrumental as in the first view, that people have to get along with each other in a secure and free society. I am not providing evidence for this second view for the moment; I am only suggesting that many thinkers would not attempt to separate knowledge or understanding from ethical behavior. One cannot exist without the other.

A Third Reason: Learning from Others

A third set of arguments encourages not only learning about others, but learning from others. This set of arguments says that we are engaged as human beings in a mutual search for truth and wisdom. That is what it means to be a human: to come to understand the world and how we are to live in it together. Humans want to gain new knowledge, especially in areas where we have shared language, desires, and life. In particular, we want to share enough to have serious conversations in the search for understanding and wisdom. There is a kind of synergy that results from alternative and parallel views being presented and discussed. This is true as a basic view, and I do not think many would dispute this.

If a person wants to learn about something, he or she would not put everyone who agrees and is of the same mind in the same room. He or she would try to include some people who disagree or have different perspectives. And one would expect that, at the end of the day, if they disagreed with each other, both would likely finish knowing more than when they began their search for knowledge. The entire academic enterprise, for example, is based on the notion that if people who do not share the same views are engaged in a conversation with each other, they will probably generate new possibilities and ideas. It is essential for the process of scientific investigation, for example, that one's view be tested against other views and that one is open to criticism for the improvement of all. This is true of the social sciences and the natural sciences. In my case, I would say that there is not a greater repository of human wisdom than what faith traditions bring to the table. If we bring them together and people have a conversation, they will learn not only about each other, they will learn from each other.
I take this argument seriously because I am trying to understand the world and I am obligated to do so. In turn, my morality will have to follow my understanding of the world. That is why I would include intellectual virtues on the list of moral virtues. That is, if it is important morally to know more, rather than less, about the world, then there are certain habits of mind that need to be developed in order to fulfill this obligation.

Living Together

A student once asked me what was wrong with sloppy thinking. Falsehood has emerged from sloppy thinking and careful thinking alike, he contended. I told him that I think that to prefer sloppy thinking is a way of being in the world that stakes out a moral position—the position that it does not matter how carefully one thinks, nor what one concludes. The process and purpose of seeking answers are both denigrated. And a question about practical reason then arises: what governs how we ought to think about doing something? If it does not matter what we believe, then there does not have to be evidence for our beliefs. I do not share this view. I believe that interreligious dialogue would help us to discover important things together, that people are motivated by the mutual search for wisdom. If we live together, then there are areas of policy which we cannot avoid making decisions about together. I believe that how we make decisions is important. We do not want to make important social decisions by drawing balls from an urn. We should make those decisions about social welfare, war, or ethical relations within society, by discussing them together, and that means including religious and spiritual insights in those conversations. In present-day America, to prefer ignorance is to submit to a comfortable, but lazy and fallacious individualism.

What about believers? People from a faith tradition are going to have a difficult time saying that they belong to a faith tradition, that it has great wisdom, and yet, that faith tradition is irrelevant to the most important events of the day. If so, then either we do not have a very deep faith, or we are afraid to bring it up. We need to design a dialogue so that one can speak unafraid. If I am correct, that there must or at least will be a religious or faith dimension to dimension in public square discussions, then there would be a strong argument for doing so in a free
dialogue rather than an atmosphere of hostility or coercion. If our goal is to meaningfully engage people about important social concerns, dialogue will accomplish this better than force. We share our lives and world together. We are connected to other people and we can not stop being connected to them. Language is one of the essential dimensions that connects us. Careful interreligious dialogue requires reasoned language, allows us to talk honestly to each other, to agree on rhetorical moves, to understand what is persuasive and what is not, and to lend legitimacy to all parties involved. We want to do things together. What should we do about the fact that people are going to go to bed tonight without any place to sleep? No one from a faith community can disinterestedly say, “So what?”

Some 20 years ago, I was asked by the American Jewish Committee to write a paper discussing whether or not there was an obligation to engage in interfaith dialogue in order to come to greater understanding of God. As an Orthodox rabbi, they expected I would oppose it. I did and God humbled me because within three years I had changed my mind. Why? At that time in Chicago, the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin was the archbishop of Chicago. He had a very sophisticated mind and way of doing theology. He helped his people to develop a way of speaking about the issues of the day which could be shared by others besides those who were Roman Catholic. He was not put off by detractors and proposed morality as a “seamless garment of life” that draws many issues together. These discussions had a terrific impact upon those of us who were involved. We felt that we were in a conversation in which we could talk about our human, spiritual, and wisdom convictions and how these beliefs holistically informed discussions about poverty, homelessness, injustice, abortion and war. We saw these discussions as a way to improve society and keep us from social hatred. We were brought closer together by learning from and about each other, and we could do things together to learn about wisdom or find a way to promote equitable social policy. It would be difficult to work to achieve a tax rate to feed the poor if the only reason for feeding the poor is the avoidance of class warfare. On the other hand, when there are deep spiritual reasons for taking care of those who are vulnerable, then people will make sacrifices and be motivated to make a positive change. In short, I learned that we must have some kind of interfaith dialogue so
that we can promote a social policy that actually reflects our genuine passions and ideals.

The Scope of Moral Imperatives

As I have presented these different reasons and hence differing moral imperatives for interreligious dialogue, it is clear that the obligations supported by such imperatives do not fall on every member of society at the same time. We need to remember that there are imperatives that belong to us as individuals. There are moral obligations, for example, to pay the debts that one incurs. Everyone who incurs a debt has a moral obligation to do so. Do we have a moral obligation to refrain from verbally or physically abusing our neighbor? Yes. It is not just my obligation or your obligation. It belongs to all of us as individuals.

However, there are other obligations that are appropriate to specific groups in society. For example, we have a moral obligation to provide for the vulnerable among us. If someone is sick and ill and cannot afford to take care of himself, then there is a moral obligation on the part of society to see to it that such a person is helped. But is that for all of us to do right now? No. There are some people who will be assigned one task, and others another task. Some people will not participate directly at all. If a person lives below the poverty level income, he or she will pay no taxes and will not even contribute by having a percentage go to social welfare payments. Not every imperative implies that each and every person must oblige always and everywhere. There is a communal imperative, and then the community has to figure out how to get the job done. But, such responsibility does not stipulate that any specific one of us must assume this kind of imperative. Additionally, these obligations would make no sense unless done in a conscious, articulated, public way so that people say as a community there is an imperative to participate in some form of interreligious dialogue. To the extent to which interreligious dialogue has to be public, then the dialogue is going to deal with areas of shared concern.

The scope of this kind of dialogue has to be wide. If it is going to be public and communal, then we are going to have to meet the mutually-agreed-upon criterion of fairness. There must be some ground rules for
how dialogue takes place so that everyone has his or her rights and dignity protected. We have to meet in a language that all participants understand. If I began speaking in Hebrew, that would be a performance, not a dialogue. It may be valuable at times, but not in a dialogue because it does not achieve any of the goals of amicable relations, understanding each other, learning from each other, or growing closer together in concerns for social justice.

In a democratic society, if we are going to argue for a moral imperative, then there must be appropriate procedures. Also, the scope of the dialogue would have to be open to the substantive issues of the good life. If we are going to really discuss matters of serious faith, then the issues are going to be more than just procedural. They are going to be substantive agreements and disagreements. Many American policy decisions are about what procedures to employ. Given a moral imperative to dialogue, then there will have to be questions about what constitutes the good life: justice, marriage, family, sexuality, the availability of knowledge and the increase of capacity, etc. These are substantive questions. We have never stopped arguing about them and it is difficult for us to come to agreement. Happily, dialogue does not always require agreement even on substantive issues of the good life. Sometimes we agree to disagree. Nonetheless, all of us are better off settling our differences in a dialogue process rather than settling them in some other way. Dialogue is the best alternative to other means of resolving real differences in perspective among members of a society.

I spent eight years involved in Catholic-Jewish dialogue in Chicago, and my colleagues and I used to have a joke that said, someday we are going to talk about something that really divides us. It was so interesting to discover that as fast as I could think that we were divided on something, I would discover there was just too much about Roman Catholicism that I did not know. I do not think we should underplay how important it is for the voices of interfaith dialogue to be heard by all members of civil society. People get a sense of what is at stake as we share what we take to be profound insights. We do not think, for example, that the idea of a Creator who orders the structures of the universe is of no consequence to what it means to live as a human being. All the Abrahamic traditions take this conviction as a central doctrine that has important ethical implications.
TO ENGAGE IN INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Additional Benefits of Dialogue:
Powerful Images of Universal Redemption

Most religions contain striking, imaginative language to describe an eschatological period, some period of time in which the world is perfected. Sometimes the description is conservative and describes a going back to say, the Garden of Eden. Other times it is a progressive and revolutionary language where adherents are going to transform the world and fix it. Thus, tikkun olam is an invitation to fix the world to make it whole and bring it together now. This is not within the Abrahamic traditions alone. Buddhism also speaks of the time when the Buddha will return at the end and will take away the suffering of all sentient beings. Both of these are a vision, and the imaginative language is powerful. Anyone who reads the Hebrew prophets sees this immediately—descriptions of what it will be like when the salvific moment will occur, when the redemption will occur. This moment is not portrayed in private terms. The world as a whole will be affected by this. The images provided by Prophets are so powerful that even people who do not believe the author is a true prophet can read it and be moved.

The founding texts of Judaism, Christianity and Islam invite myriads of people who are not adherents to any of those religions but who find the texts and the visions presented therein compelling. One advantage of this universal vision being articulated in terms of faith traditions is that, although they have a rational understanding or basis, the language and the imagination of them is powerful and speaks to people. As such, we have religious faiths that articulate universally, often redemptive, world-transforming visions in a way that includes moral responsibility. We would therefore conclude that such a universal religious vision assumes the capacity of human beings to speak reasonably to each other about moral matters. Whatever the source of that universality, be it human nature or another reality, the vision that is articulated is one of humanity talking to each other.

This suggests that there is an imperative to engage in dialogue that involves working toward the common good. Even Immanuel Kant articulates the kingdom of ends where all of us treat each other as ends rather than means. But what is the essence of the obligation? The obligation pushes to action and lives in the details. If we are obligated as a society to
heal the sick, then we are obviously obligated to work to heal the sick. If one is obligated to pay individual debts, then one must pay them. If one has a moral obligation to pay the rent, then one must write the check. Being obligated also means that one must articulate the kingdom of ends—not perfectly—but we articulate it, argue about it, and discuss it. The assumption is that, as human beings, we can create visions of ideal worlds.

In this section, I have suggested that the meaning of faith is not exhausted by ethics. Beliefs can have an enormous set of ethical implications about the kind of world for which we are willing to work and for the conditions under which we should work for them. Again, I am referring to Cardinal Bernardin. He articulated a vision of how society can work together, grounded in a single value, trying to connect and champion the value of life. That places Cardinal Bernardin's thoughts together with Rabbi Irving Greenberg's notion of the triumph of life. This vision imagines a society which uses the value of life to consistently reflect and critique itself. How should we behave, settle disputes, handle difficulties about child rearing, for example? All of these life-oriented questions would come up and we would agree to work toward articulating ways to making society move in that life-affirming direction, toward a universal vision that would include discussions of life-affirming religious faith. Of course, any shared moral discussion would have to strive as far as possible to allow people to speak openly about their own views, and not have them officially interpreted or presented by others.

I have argued that, indeed, there is a moral imperative to engage in noncoercive, open and honest interfaith dialogue. Perhaps, if religion had nothing to do with life, then there would not be such a moral imperative. Further, if the vision of life were not universal, there would be no moral imperative. If there were no way to talk to each other or if we did not have a common nature or way of practicing morality which generated imperatives for us all, then there might be no moral imperative. I have argued that the human race as a whole is engaged in the enormous enterprise of seeking to create a world which has profound moral value; and that is the part of the religious imperative to be part of those moral conversations and part of the imperatives of moral conversation to involve religious people. I am aware that this view is not shared by all. I realize that for some people, morality automatically moves them into the
personal, private sphere. For others, morality has almost nothing to do with the give-and-take of argument or discussion. And still others hold that morality has nothing to do with the insights and wisdom that are drawn from forces other than reason. I am not going in these directions.

Do we really expect interreligious dialogue to discover a single vision for society? I think not. In probability theory we get nuanced answers that aren’t absolute. Place 100 balls into an urn and begin to randomly draw them out. We draw 3 black balls and 10 white balls. We surmise that there are probably more white balls than black balls in the urn, although there could be 90 black balls and only 10 white. Probability theory is a way in which we suggest things that may not describe the entire answer. But, in the case of probability experiments, there is a correct answer because the balls in the urn can be definitely counted. The difficulty with life is one cannot count the events of human history. As soon as we are through counting, there has already been another event added to the urn of understanding.

In principle, one can imagine an end of history and how it should be and how one should act. In principle, we can imagine that there will be only one theory of religious wisdom, and there will be only one language in which it is expressed to the rest, and that somehow all of us would sign on for that. We could believe that. That position is based on the notion that we are aiming for one and only one ideal goal.

As an alternative, imagine that even in the ideal situation there would be multiple religious discourses and theories. Imagine that it is always better to have more than one theory because any one religious theory will always leave out an aspect of reality that others have reflected on differently. Whether or not these are multiple religious languages or multiple theories, and whether or not they are mutually compatible, remains to be discovered through dialogue. One could argue they are, in principle, mutually compatible but not always completely mutually comprehensible. Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, the archbishop of Milan, reminded me at a talk that the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding of Sacred Heart University sponsored in Rome in 2002, that there are some areas where if one is not part of the faith community, then he or she will not be able to understand those areas. It is not that, in principle, one could not get it, but in practice one would have to be part of the particular group to understand the doctrine or experience. He gave the
Eucharist as an example. He said it is probably not extremely helpful for us to sit and discuss the depth of meanings of the Eucharist. Agreed, but that does not mean there is nothing else to discuss. There are some areas where multiple languages can be helpful and other areas where they are not as helpful. Short of coming to the end of human history, there will always be a continuous search for wisdom and we are advantaged by multiple positions.

My suggestion, then, is that if religious life includes moral inquiry, and if that inquiry has to extend to conclusions that have implications for all members of society or for humanity as a whole, then we will be advantaged in that conversation by multiple languages and multiple bodies of belief. This is important and unavoidable because it is impossible to live together as a serious and responsible society without articulating a moral code which includes the kinds of insights that are found in wisdom traditions, whatever the language in which they are articulated. In doing so, we are acknowledging the power of alternative ways of expressing or understanding the world. We are acknowledging that the power to transform our society is real when we are free to share our visions through discussions and by challenging each other.

Looking Forward

Genuine interreligious dialogue will not, almost by definition, end in an increase in animosity. The conditions have to exist for the possibility of genuine participation in safety, which was not the case a few hundred years ago. For example, in business mediation, people come in, and the two sides are not in agreement. They want to be on the same page, because a good deal is a good deal. They are going to pay money to get on the same page. Financially, one gets rewarded for agreeing. To the extent to which people are able to articulate a willingness to listen to others, in which they are willing to adopt a vocabulary which shows respect for others and stop saying that the other’s ideas are ridiculous and imbecilic, then these people are able to engage in dialogue. A big footnote needs to be added that says there is no imperative to engage in mutual recrimination. There is no imperative to engage in threats or intimidation and call it dialogue.
If we cannot imagine any real interfaith dialogues that could be held without an explosion, then we need more facilitators. I have never been in such an interreligious dialogue, even the difficult ones that had political freight attached to them to the point where I was nervous of being physically harmed. I have never been in a single case where it seemed anywhere near as difficult as the worst business mediation, nor did it ever get close to what I have experienced when facilitating a session with people going through a messy divorce. It was not even in the same category. Of course, there are always people who stake out turf and who do not want a dialogue. They only want to tell you what the real truth is. In those instances, no one is going to go anywhere. The imperative is not that everyone should be having dialogues all the time. The imperative is governed by the proper conditions, such that where it is possible to have such an interfaith dialogue, one is morally obligated to do so.

I have lived among some relatively monolithic societies for a while. The question is, do most of us actually live any longer in such a society, or if we think we do, are we merely creating the appearance of a monolithic religious society? Seemingly monolithic societies can go to enormous efforts to hide from outsiders that there are real social tensions and disagreements. The insiders can tell you they are not monolithic and they do not perceive themselves as being on the same page. They have long-standing differences that, in their mind, are enormous.

In the end, there are real costs to avoiding interreligious dialogue. Others cannot be ignored. If you will not talk to me on the street, so it goes. If you do not want to vote and you are not interested in changing policy, then you choose to be in your small enclave. But the day you walk into a government office, the day you are a candidate, the day you put out a pamphlet that tries to get us to change the town line, the day you build anything that affects others, on that day, we are in dialogue. There are less desirable ways of settling such issues. You have a choice. One could say either move the town line or you will not be mayor next year. Or, we could talk about it. But, the minute you want the town line moved, the minute you want anything, the minute you want protection from the police department, the minute you want doctors to treat you, the minute you want me to smile at you on the street as we go by, rather than glare and throw rocks, the minute you want any common life together, then I am recommending to you dialogue over fighting about
it or ignoring it. Our individual integrity and our shared life in society depend upon it.

It is better to settle an argument by looking for a better logical argument, than for a gun. Abuse is not as effective as an attempt to understand. These are moral categories as well as religious ones, and it belongs to all people to articulate and live this essential side of our nature by promoting visions of social love and processes that cultivate mutual understanding and a common search for truth.
The Witness of the Monotheistic Religions

On the eve of a symposium which brings together scholars from three traditions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, it is good to talk about monotheism. Yet it might be well to remember that these three are not the only monotheistic religions. One should not forget the Sikh dharma, which is definitely monotheistic in its teachings. If a link is sought between the three religions that concern us here, it is certainly better to use the term Abrahamic religions as has been done in the title of the conference. Each of the traditions takes pride in connecting itself with Abraham, and although there are significant variations, Abraham is presented as a model of faith and of witness to the one God.

Divine Unicity

Let us dwell for a moment on this concept of divine unicity. Some people tend to assert that Jews, Christians and Muslims do not adore the same God. This is certainly not the teaching of the Catholic Church. The Second Vatican Council, in its central document, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium), stated clearly: “But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first-place among whom are the Muslims; these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind’s judge on the last day” (LG, 16). This did not even have to be stated with regard to Judaism, for God’s dealings with the chosen people form, as it were, the prehistory of Christianity and “the Church cannot
forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament by way of the people with whom God, in his inexpressible mercy, established the ancient covenant” (Nostra Aetate, 4).

Each tradition has a liturgical expression of this primary article of faith. Judaism makes use of the Shema: “Listen, Israel . . . I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no gods except me” (Deuteronomy 5:1, 6–7). Christians proclaim, Credo in unum Deum, I believe in one God. Muslims, at every ritual prayer (salât), recite the shahâda: Lâ ilâha illâ Llâh: There is no divinity except God.

There are, of course, differences in the way of understanding this God. For the first of these religions, God has chosen one single people to bear witness before the world. For Christians, God has become incarnate, and in so doing has shown his solidarity with the whole of the human race that he has created. It is through the incarnate Son of God that the Trinitarian nature of God comes to be known. For Muslims, such a Trinitarian concept would seem to destroy the essential unicity of God. Moreover God’s transcendence would exclude the possibility of incarnation. But God has raised up within each people a prophet to remind them of their primordial covenant with him. He has finally sent Muhammad to be the Seal of Prophecy and a mercy (rahma) for the whole of humanity.

We are dealing then with three distinct religions, and indeed the differences are to be found at the very heart of that which unites them, faith in the one God. Moreover these three traditions have seen their boundaries defined through historical development. Christianity did not set out to be a distinct religion, but it separated itself from Judaism, perhaps not without anguish. Islam discovered that Jews and Christians did not accept its message, and had to come to terms with the continued existence of their communities. So the three traditions have to coexist, leaving it to God to resolve their differences in his own good time.

Despite the differences in understanding, the common faith in the unicity of God remains. This means a refusal of any sort of dualistic vision of the world. Good and Evil do certainly exist, but they are not two coequal principles that are eternally struggling one with the other. We know too that we cannot really divide good and evil into two distinct
camps. We are conscious that in each one of us these two forces exist. Saint Paul has described in vivid terms this inward conflict: "I cannot understand my own behavior. I fail to carry out the things I want to do, and I find myself doing the very things I hate. . . . The fact is, I know of nothing good living in me—living, that is, in my unspiritual self—for though the will to do good is in me, the performance is not, with the result that instead of doing the good things I want to do, I carry out the sinful things I do not want. . . . In fact, this seems to be the rule, that every single time I want to do good it is something evil that comes to hand" (Romans 7:15, 18–19, 21). Yet Paul is also certain that there is a way out of this predicament. His cry is well known: "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:24–25). Faith in the One Almighty God includes belief that, whatever appearances might suggest, the forces of evil will be overcome. Good will have the final word.

A further dimension of monotheism is naturally a refusal of polytheism, where God would have to share his prerogatives with other divinities, and where indeed there could arise a certain rivalry between divinities jealous of their own spheres of influence. Our traditions are full of satirical arguments against such a conception of God. Yet there are other forms of polytheism, or at least of associating something with God, which can insidiously creep into religion. Like the Little Prince who had to be vigilant lest baobabs should take root on his asteroid and completely take it over, so the one devoted to God has to beware lest the relationship become corrupted. It is necessary to act for God alone and, in seeking to do his will, to be careful not to associate with this worship our own desires and ambitions. Islamic spirituality has developed the idea of this fight against shirk, associating something with God, in ways that certainly have a resonance with Christians, and I presume also with Jews in the First Commandment.

**Witness**

Jews, Christians, and Muslims, we are called to give witness to God in the world. Witness is a key concept in these three traditions and is worth examining more closely.
The Law which God gives to his people, as an expression of his divine will, is inscribed on two tables. When Moses is instructed on how to build the sanctuary, he is told: “Inside the ark you will place the Testimony that I shall give you” (Exodus 25:16). This is understood as a reference to the two tablets on which the Decalogue was written. It is there as a constant reminder to the people of their obligations. Now if the law is not observed, if the people abandon their God, then God will bear witness against his people. The prophet Micah presents God as if he were conducting a trial: “Listen, you peoples, all of you. Attend, earth, and everything in it. The Lord is going to give evidence against you” (Micah 1:2). This witnessing against is always, however, in view of conversion and a return to God, for the prophet Ezekiel conveys the word of the Lord: “As I live—it is the Lord who speaks—I take pleasure not in the death of a wicked man, but in the turning back of a wicked man who changes his ways to win life” (Ezekiel 33:11).

In the Christian tradition, the Good News of the Kingdom, preached by Jesus, is destined to be “proclaimed to the whole world as a witness to all the nations” (Matthew 24:14). This is why Jesus sends his disciples to be his witnesses “not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judea and Samaria, and indeed to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

In Islam the profession of faith takes the form of witness, but the witness of human beings is founded on divine witness: lākin Allāhu yashhadu bi-mā anzala ilay-ka anzalahu bi-ʾilmī-hi wa-l-malahʾikatu yashhadūna wa-kafā bi-LLāhi shahīdan: “God testifies concerning that which he has revealed to you [Muhammad]; in His knowledge He has revealed it, and the angels also testify. And God is sufficient as a witness” (Qurʾan 4:166). Also in Islam this witness has a communal dimension: wa-kadhālika jaʿalnā-kum ummatan wasatan li-takūnū shuhadāʾ ʿalā l-nās wa-yakūna l-rasūl ʿalay-kum shahīdan: “Thus We have appointed you a middle nation, that you may be witnesses against mankind, and that the messenger may be a witness against you” (Qurʾan 2:143).

This theme could be further developed, but I would like to suggest some ways in which a common witness can be given in the world today. Three points will be touched upon:

- The primacy of God
- The responsibility of human beings
- Service to humanity
The Primacy of God

Are we not called, as believers in God, to that Truth which surpasses us? Is it not our duty to remind this modern society of ours that the human being cannot be its own measure? Human dignity has its source in the creative act of God, whether or not we would wish to go on and affirm that God has created the human person in his own image and likeness. This last-mentioned belief does in fact reinforce the requirement of respect for each human being. It is perhaps good to recall here the teaching of the final section of the Declaration, *Nostra Aetate*:

We cannot truly pray to God, the Father of all, if we treat any people in other than brotherly fashion, for all men are created in God's image. Man's relation to God the Father and man's relation to his fellowmen are so dependent on each other that the Scripture says: "He who does not love, does not know God" (1 John 4:8). There is no basis, therefore, for any discrimination between individual and individual, or between people, arising either from human dignity or the rights which flow from it (NA, 5).

To accept the will of the Creator is not to go against the interests of humanity but rather to act to its advantage, for it helps to achieve its destiny.

As believers in God, are we not called to make our voices heard in society in this way? It is surely an obligation on our part to demand respect for the fundamental rights of human beings: the right to life, to physical integrity (which would include opposition to torture and any form of punishment that is incompatible with human dignity), the right to respect for one's reputation, the right to the means necessary for living a decent life, the right to education and of access to cultural development and to objective information, the right to freedom in the search for the truth, freedom of conscience and religious freedom which includes also the right to profess and practice one's faith not only as an individual but as a member of a community. There is a vast field here for common endeavor. We should remember that to show respect for our fellow human beings is also to show respect for God.
The Responsibility of Human Beings

To insist on the primacy of God does not mean that the human being is reduced to the status of a pawn on the divine chess board. On the contrary, faith in the Creator God leads to an acceptance of the role that he has entrusted to the human being, namely to be a “cocreator,” or, in Islamic terminology, God’s khal’ifa, his vicegerent or deputy. We are responsible for the created world and all it contains.

The very existence of evil becomes a challenge to the one whom God has placed in this world to take charge of it. As a result of sin it is said that the earth will produce brambles and thistles and that it is only at the sweat of his brow that man will be able to reap its fruits (cf. Genesis 3:18–19). Yet this has not prevented human beings from making progress in agriculture and inventing machinery that can reduce the fatigue of labor. Similarly it is said that the woman will give birth to her children in pain and that her husband will lord it over her (cf. Genesis 3:16), but this has not put the brakes on advances in gynecology nor of helping couples to live in a relationship of equality and love.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans to which reference has already been made, says: “From the beginning till now the entire creation, as we know, has been groaning in one great act of giving birth; and not only creation, but all of us who possess the firstfruits of the Spirit, we too groan inwardly as we wait for our bodies to be set free” (Romans 8:22–23). This, as we are well aware, does not imply waiting passively. It is our duty to cooperate with the Spirit of God, to work so that the Kingdom of God may come.

Service to Humanity

From what has just been said about human responsibility, it is an easy step to the idea of service to humanity. Believers in God, we are called to bear witness to our faith in God but also to our faith in the human person. Strengthened by our faith in God the Creator, the Provident Master of all, whom we like to call Father, we can bring to the world the hope it needs. We are convinced that evil, that sin, will not be victorious. We believe that God helps us and gives us the strength to continue to strive for the good of our brothers and sisters. It is these convictions of ours that
sustain us, in good moments and bad, in times of distress as in times of happiness, in the midst of conflict and when there is peace, at times of failure, apparent or real, and also in times of success.

We feel the need too for common witness in today's world. In October 1999, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue organized an interreligious assembly, held in the Vatican, in order to examine the role of religions in the Third Millennium. In the final message the participants in this assembly declared:

We are conscious of the urgent need to confront together responsibly and courageously the problems and challenges of our modern world; to work together to affirm human dignity as the source of human rights and their corresponding duties, in the struggle for justice and peace for all; and to create a new spiritual consciousness for all humanity in accordance with the religious traditions so that the principle of respect for freedom of religion and freedom of conscience prevail. (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Towards a Culture of Dialogue, Vatican City, 2000, p.79).

They added:

We know that the problems in the world are so great that we cannot solve them alone. Therefore there is an urgent need for interreligious collaboration. We are all aware that interreligious collaboration does not imply giving up our own religious identity but is rather a journey of discovery: we learn to respect one another as members of the one human family; we learn both to respect our differences and to appreciate the common values that bind us to one another; therefore, we are convinced that we are able to work together to strive to prevent conflict and to overcome the crises existing in different parts of the world. Collaboration among the different religions must be based on the rejection of fanaticism, extremism and mutual antagonisms which lead to violence. (ibid. pp.79–80).

The next passage in the message underlines the importance of education, something that is of great relevance to this institution, Sacred Heart University, in which we are gathered and which has been a pioneer in this field. There is mention of support for the family, of helping young
people to shape their own conscience, of underlining common fundamental moral and spiritual values. There is an appeal to make sure that textbooks give objective presentations of religious traditions, and attention is called in a similar vein to the use of the mass media to impart objective information.

Finally the message makes two final appeals. "We appeal to religious leaders to promote the spirit of dialogue within their respective communities and to be ready to engage in dialogue themselves with civil society at all levels. We appeal to all leaders of the world whatever their field of influence: to refuse to allow religion to be used to incite hatred and violence; to refuse to allow religion to be used to justify discrimination; and to respect the role of religion in society at international, national and local levels" (ibid. p. 80).

Much space has been given to this message because it is possible, probable even, that it is not widely known. Moreover, it is evident that it has not lost any of its relevance for today's world.

In the Service of Peace

This statement underlined the need for the cooperation of people of different religions in the service of peace. It is in fact often said that there will be no peace in the world until there is peace among the religions. A finger is pointed to religions as being at the origin of conflicts. It could be questioned whether this is wholly true. Of course, it must be admitted that religion has, in the course of history, produced conflicts, and can do so today. But such conflicts may have a multiplicity of causes, and so it is only fair to distinguish between those which are strictly speaking religious, taking their origin from differences of belief, and those which are based on nonreligious motivations but take on a religious coloring.

Tensions and disputes can arise within a given religious tradition because of different ways of envisaging the faith or of understanding it. One could cite the Christological disputes of the first centuries of Christianity, in which the imperial power became involved. Even today, within the various Christian confessions, there arise serious causes of division, though these do not usually end up in armed combat. Islam too
has known in its history grave dissensions which have given rise to assassinations and conflict.

The ways of overcoming these conflicts may be different. In Christianity, Councils were convoked in order to determine correct belief and to condemn heresies (punishment for heretics often being entrusted to the secular arm). Special courts were set up, such as the Inquisition, or the Mihna in Islam, again to distinguish between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, and to punish those who had strayed. Even though today we would not approve of these methods, it should be recognized that the aim in all this was to keep the integrity of the respective faith and to protect society.

Very often, however, conflicts which appear to be religious are caused by nonreligious factors. These may be socioeconomic causes, such as in Northern Ireland where the social difference between Catholics and Protestants and lack of equal opportunities has consolidated the opposition between the two groups. Something similar could be said about the recent clashes in Indonesia, in Ambon and Kalimantan, where migration has brought different groups which happen to be Islamic on the one hand and Christian on the other to oppose one another. Ethnic and cultural factors also come into play, as in the struggle between Tamils and Cingalese in Sri Lanka, or Hindus and Muslims in Kashmir. And how should one categorize the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians?

Whether the causes are religious or not, the followers of different religions feel the duty to contribute to overcoming these conflicts and to work for peace. They are conscious that peace is a gift from God which has to be implored, but which also has, in a sense, to be earned. It is this conviction that has led Pope John Paul II to invite representatives of different religions to Assisi, Italy, to pray for peace. He did this in October 1986, and more recently on January 24, 2002. Let me quote some of the words John Paul II used on that occasion:

If peace is God’s gift and has its source in him, where are we to seek it and how can we build it, if not in a deep and intimate relationship with God? To build the peace of order, justice and freedom requires, therefore, a priority commitment to prayer, which is openness, listening, dialogue and finally union with God, the prime wellspring of true peace.
To pray is not to escape from history and the problems which it presents. On the contrary, it is to choose to face reality not on our own, but with the strength that comes from on high, the strength of truth and love which have their ultimate source in God: Faced with the treachery of evil, religious people can count on God, who absolutely wills what is good. They can pray to him to have the courage to face even the greatest difficulties with a sense of personal responsibility, never yielding to fatalism or impulsive reactions (cf. Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Peace: a Single Goal and a Shared Intention, Vatican City, 2002, p. 91).

The representatives gathered in Assisi on that day, where representatives from the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding of Sacred Heart University, Rabbi Joseph Ehrenkranz and Dr. David Coppola were present, made a solemn tenfold commitment to peace, each commitment being read out in a different language. Let me quote some of these which emphasize the need for dialogue among the religions.

1. We commit ourselves to proclaiming our firm conviction that violence and terrorism are incompatible with the authentic spirit of religion, and, as we condemn every recourse to violence and war in the name of God or of religion, we commit ourselves to doing everything possible to eliminate the root causes of terrorism.

2. We commit ourselves to educating people to mutual respect and esteem, in order to help bring about a peaceful and fraternal coexistence between people of different ethnic groups, cultures and religions.

3. We commit ourselves to fostering the culture of dialogue, so that there will be an increase of understanding and mutual trust between individuals and among people, for these are the premise of authentic peace.

5. We commit ourselves to frank and patient dialogue, refusing to consider our differences as an insurmountable barrier, but recognizing instead that to encounter the diversity of others can become an opportunity for greater reciprocal understanding.
The Conditions for a True Dialogue

Dialogue is never easy. It is important to recognize that there are certain conditions required for it to be successful. The first of these is an open mind and a welcoming spirit. This means that two extremes are to be avoided: on the one hand a certain ingenuity which accepts everything without further questioning, and on the other hand a hypercritical attitude which leads to suspicion. Impartiality is required. What is being sought is an equitable solution to the particular problem which is to be resolved.

Being open-minded does not imply being without personal convictions. On the contrary, rootedness in one’s own convictions will allow for greater openness, for it takes away the fear of losing one’s identity. It thus facilitates the understanding of the other’s convictions. Such an openness leads to the admission that the whole of the truth is not just on one side. There is always a need to learn from others, to receive from them, to benefit from their values and everything that is good in their traditions. Dialogue in this spirit helps to overcome prejudices and to revise stereotypes.

Returning to the concept of monotheism, it would seem to me that we are helped in this particular aspect of dialogue by our belief in a God who is Truth. God alone is to be identified with absolute Truth. We ourselves cannot pretend to attain this level. Without falling into relativism, we can readily admit that our view of things does not really attain to ultimate Truth. For this reason, in dialogue it is necessary not only to speak but also to listen to the other in order to receive the other’s part of truth.

The Pillars of Peace

Truth is the first pillar of peace, according to the teaching of Pope John XXIII in his letter Pacein in Terris, which he wrote forty years ago. John Paul II has recalled this anniversary in his message for the Day of Peace this year, and has brought to mind the four essential requirements for peace identified by John XXIII: truth, justice, love, and freedom. Truth
brings each individual to acknowledge his or her own rights, but also to recognize his or her own duties toward others. Justice leads people to respect the rights of others and also to fulfill their duties. Love goes beyond justice, for it makes people feel the needs of others as if they were their own, and this empathy leads them to share their own gifts with others, not only material goods but also the values of mind and spirit. Freedom, finally, is a factor in building peace when it allows people to act according to reason and to assume responsibility for their own actions.

John Paul II in his message for the previous year, 2002, had himself spoken of two pillars of peace, justice and forgiveness, which is a particular form of love. Human justice is always imperfect and needs to be complemented by forgiveness. It is this which allows broken relationships to be restored. It allows confidence to be regained and a new departure to take place. This holds good not only for individuals, but also for social groups, even States. It is the capacity to forgive that can create the conditions necessary to overcome the sterility of reciprocal condemnations and the spiral of increasing violence.

This teaching of the Pope is resolutely Christian, for Jesus taught that God is a Father who loves to pardon (cf. Luke 15). Yet surely this conforms to the image of God given in the First Testament. The Psalmist invites his soul to bless the Lord and to remember his kindnesses, “in forgiving all your offenses,” for he is “tender and compassionate, slow to anger, most loving” (Psalm 103:3, 8). The book of Nehemiah addresses God in a similar way: “But you are a God of forgiveness, gracious and loving, slow to anger, abounding in goodness” (Nehemiah 9:17). Does not the Qur'an echo this? God is constantly proclaimed al-rahmân al-rahîm, the Beneficent, the Merciful. He is also al-ghafîr, the one whose very inclination is to pardon. According to Islamic spirituality believers are to “clothe” themselves with the attributes of God, so surely there is an encouragement to forgive as God is forgiving.

Let me conclude, then, on this note. The monotheistic religions, in particular the Abrahamic religions, have much to contribute to peace. They will do so by upholding the dignity of human beings, by pursuing justice, but also by practicing and appealing for the spirit of pardon. John Paul II concludes this year’s peace message with these words:
The fortieth anniversary of *Pacem in Terris* is an apt occasion to return to Pope John XXIII's prophetic teaching. Catholic communities will know how to celebrate this anniversary during the year with initiatives which, I hope, will have an ecumenical and interreligious character and be open to all those who have a heartfelt desire "to break through the barriers which divide them, to strengthen the bonds of mutual love, to learn to understand one another and to pardon those who have done them wrong."
PART I ~ SETTING A CONTEXT FOR DIALOGUE

For Further Discussion and Study

How can Jews, Christians and Muslims witness to the oneness of God, while remaining faithful to their specific revelations and unique expressions?

Does interreligious dialogue necessarily lead to relativism?

Is the primacy of God and truth compromised in interreligious dialogue?

What is the role of interreligious dialogue in sharing the truth of the one God?

What are the theological reasons for engaging in interreligious dialogue? What are the barriers or obstacles to such dialogue?

Is interreligious dialogue a means to discover truth and wisdom? If so, in what contexts?

Can interreligious dialogue be the sacred space where the divine meets the human? If so, how might we properly prepare for and promote such an encounter?

For Action in the Community

What are the reasons you believe that interreligious dialogue is important? How can you teach those reasons to others of your faith?

Is interreligious dialogue practical? Does it benefit the participants or the larger community? If so, how can you bring those benefits to your neighborhood?
Should interreligious dialogue and education be sponsored or encouraged in your synagogue, parish, or mosque? If so, how? If not, what are the appropriate forums for relating with the other, and can you sponsor one?

What are the proper conditions for authentic and respectful dialogue to take place? How can you help to create those conditions in your neighborhood?

Does dialogue offer us the opportunity to better serve humanity together, especially in the areas of social justice and the work of peace? If so, what can your community do with other faiths to promote social justice and peace?

Do you think documents such as Nostra Aetate or Dabru Emet or even the 2003 Chicago summit statement, “Urgent Call for Reflection, Hope and Action,” have a positive effect on bringing people together to dialogue and understanding? How can you spread the ideas advocated in these and other documents? [See www.ccju.org for the full text of these and other interreligious documents.]