Prof. Dr. DDr. h.c. Hans Köchler
Professor em. of Philosophy, University of Innsbruck, Austria
Honorary Professor, Pamukkale University, Turkey
President, International Progress Organization
Co-President, International Academy of Philosophy

MONOTHEISM AND THE MEANING OF COEXISTENCE:
A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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– Check against delivery –

Mr. Chairman,
Ladies and gentlemen!

Never before in the history of mankind has there been a situation where a multitude of civilizations and religions has *co-existed* in a more complex and immediate form than in our era of globalization. Anywhere on the globe, the human being is faced with the *simultaneity* of different metaphysical conceptions and belief systems. This diversity exists under conditions that are increasingly determined by *technology* of which, at the beginning of the 21st century, the most salient feature are the digital information and communication techniques. In earlier eras, a community may have been able to retreat into its own domain and shield itself from outside influences. This option – not to interact, not to communicate – is not available anymore.

Through all of recorded history, religious differences have all too often been causes of conflict between communities of believers or the political entities (states) in which those communities are organized. The crusades of the Middle Ages are testimony to this. People have eagerly tried, and invested a lot of intellectual and emotional energy, to identify the differences that *distinguish* them from one another in order to assert their cultural and religious identity or justify their hegemony. Drawing the borderlines between "us" and "them" – as a means of self-assertion – has been part and parcel of identity politics until the present day (to the point that even *within* communities, sub-groups have zealously striven to distinguish themselves from one another). Inter- and intra-religious conflicts, often fuelled by socio-economic interests, have constituted an important part of the history of civilizations. Since Samuel Huntington, upon the end of the Cold War, introduced the thesis of an intrinsic hostility between different religious worldviews, the paradigm of the "clash of civilizations" has become a buzzword in discourses on world order, and in particular as regards relations between the Western world and Islam.

The simultaneity of *distinct* civilizational and religious life-worlds and value systems under the conditions of our "global village" has given new importance to *peaceful coexistence*. In the context of globalization, the plurality of religious faiths has become a <u>fact</u> that determines every-day life in our interconnected world; it has indeed become an inescapable social reality. To "manage" cultural and religious differences in a *rational* manner is now an imperative of peace, at the local, regional and global level. This is where philosophy of religion can play a useful role.

There should be no misunderstanding, however. Acknowledging a *plurality* of religions and analyzing their structural content does in no way imply a defense of *relativism*. Accepting religious pluralism is also not to be confused either with a *reductionist* approach that merely derives religious dogma from historical or socio-cultural factors, subordinating it to the empirical realm, or with forms of religious *syncretism*.

To describe the compatibility of a *plurality* of faiths with the *universality* of truth, one might use the metaphor of the *Copernican model* in cosmology: All theistic belief systems actually reveal different aspects of one and the same reality of the true God, merely taking different paths to achieve the same goal, in a way that is similar to the planets' revolving around the same star (the sun), which keeps them in their unique place, but along different trajectories.

It is certainly legitimate to describe the actual multitude of belief systems empirically and in their sociological, psychological and historical dimensions; but only a deeper *phenomenological* approach will help us to understand religious experience as a comprehension of the world *sui generis*, and to grasp its inherent metaphysical truth – in a manner that allows us to reach an understanding of ourselves in the context of the κόσμος / cosmos (the universe). Just to give one example: The classical Aristotelian notion of the Supreme Being as the πρῶτον κινοῦν ἀκίνητον ("the first unmoved mover") has through the ages informed metaphysical thinking in different religions and civilizational contexts.

General ontological concepts – that transcend cultural differences – indeed allow the philosopher to undertake a *structural comparison* between distinct systems of faith and their metaphysical notions, and, subsequently, help the believer to better <u>define</u>, and <u>defend</u>, his own position. A *logical* point can also be made in this *ontological* context, namely in regard to the ultimate truth that is expressed in and conveyed though the three monotheistic religions:

If there exists only <u>one</u> god, then this God must be one and the same for all. There cannot be three different "gods" for Jews, Christians and Muslims – only three different *perceptions* of God or *manifestations* of truth in the context of the respective revelation. Awareness of this logically obvious, but nonetheless often neglected, truth can foster a deeper sense of community among believers and may contribute to religious and societal peace beyond historical and socio-cultural differences. In this context, the late Cardinal Franz König, Archbishop of Vienna, underlined that "particularly today a discussion between Islam and Christianity on monotheism has a beneficial function and should contribute towards the reduction of suspicion, towards the understanding of the peoples of the world and the

peaceful coexistence of nations." He made these remarks in a message addressed to the first international conference on "The Concept of Monotheism in Islam and Christianity," which I organized in Rome in the year 1981. I had then characterized the aim of this undertaking – namely an analysis of the central metaphysical notion of monotheism – as to "deepen one's own self-comprehension through the encounter with and respect for other religious and cultural traditions." This is what I have identified as *"dialectics" of cultural identity*, which is the basis of a genuine understanding and mutual appreciation among civilizations. It goes without saying that this reflection about the nature of monotheism also includes the teachings of Judaism.

As regards the role of philosophy in thinking about faith, I would like to make one more point. It is obvious, but must be stressed nonetheless, that "philosophy of religion" is not identical with "religious philosophy." The philosophical approach *per se* is neutral vis-à-vis a particular faith; it embodies the <u>universality</u> of the mind – *without prejudice* to the individual religious commitment of the philosopher. A widely used term such as "Christian philosophy," to give just one example that illustrates this semantical issue, relates to the philosophical ideas developed by thinkers who, as individuals, belong to the Christian faith; it does not mean that the specific notions or theories expounded by them *as such* are exclusively "Christian." No one can claim the λόγος / logos (reason or, in a modern context, rationality) as a privilege of his religion alone, excluding believers of other faiths from the "community of discourse" and denying them the status of equal partners in the quest for metaphysical truth. Any *exclusivist* approach is intrinsically alien to the *philosophical* mind – in whichever historical or socio-cultural context.

Endowed with the capacity of self-reflection (which cannot merely be reduced to the physical realm), the human being has always striven for the ultimate truth and meaning of life. The *search for the transcendent* has united thinkers of all civilizations throughout the ages. This genuinely *philosophical* quest is based on *experience* and *reason* in a comprehensive sense (and not only in the meaning of European Enlightenment). Through its universal outlook, and transcending cultural differences, philosophy has indeed created a *common space* of reflection on the existence of the absolute. This is the *essence* and *basis* of the mission of philosophy of religion also in the present age – in spite of the vain efforts, in our modern era, to relegate religious experience to the psychological and sociological domains.

It is here where the question of the specific meaning of *coexistence* between different religions, and the civilizations associated with them, comes into play. We cannot avoid posing

the one fundamental question: In what sense may one speak of "coexistence" if one bears in mind that each religion represents the *ultimate* truth in a form that is *unique* to its socio-cultural environment and the circumstances of its revelation? In view of this uniqueness in the self-perception of each tradition, one may conceptually distinguish between <u>institutional</u> co-existence, implying mutual respect, between different religions with their specific manifestations of truth and religious practices on the one hand, and the joint <u>spiritual</u> undertaking among those who analyze and compare the underlying metaphysical notions, on the other. The latter relates to the efforts of those who engage in the *philosophy of religion*, who analyze the distinct forms of revelation of the absolute, and its categorizations, and who undertake to relate the basic elements of each system of faith to other such systems. Hermeneutical analysis and structural comparison between concepts of faith is the field where a philosophical approach – in clear distinction from an apologetic one – is conceptually appropriate and theologically legitimate.

I would like to conclude by referring again to the anthropological constant that is at the roots of religious belief as well as philosophical thought: The quest for the *absolute* is an intrinsic characteristic of the human being; it is the essence of our common spiritual heritage. While, in the religious domain, this effort is pursued on the basis of revelation and faith, the philosophical method is solely dependent on (human) reason. These two distinct approaches are not contradictory, but <u>complementary</u>. Without imposing itself on the original domain of faith, philosophy – through an analysis of the *common structure* of religious experience – may assist the believer to overcome a merely apologetic approach, and to reach out to the truth revealed in other religions.

In this way, philosophical reflection of and understanding between religions may give metaphysical depth to our modern technological civilization, which, in its globalized version, risks forgetting its metaphysical roots. In the spirit of "unity in diversity," coexistence between the monotheistic religions can indeed become the cornerstone of a lasting order of peace and justice in the 21st century.

Thank you for your attention.

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