

Peace in Our Time? Suffering, Solidarity, and the Promise of Interreligious Engagement

By Azza Karam and Aaron Hollander

Aaron Hollander, for *Ecumenical Trends*: Thank you for joining me, Prof. Karam, for a conversation with *Ecumenical Trends*. We are honored to seek your insight on some urgent contemporary questions, as the Graymoor Institute and the Friars of the Atonement share the core conviction of Religions for Peace: that religious communities can and must collaborate to be a force for building peace in our difficult time, and at all times. After Vatican II, the Friars of the Atonement and their ecumenical institute entered unreservedly into a variety of interreligious conversations, even as our ecumenical work continues to intervene especially upon the fault lines of fear, hate, and division within Christianity. I hope we can come back to the question of the interdependence between *interreligious* and *intrareligious* peacebuilding, as this is where your perspective as Secretary General of Religions for Peace strikes me as most urgent for us to understand and engage. After all, there are parallel problems that crop up, and different religious communities involved in their own internal crises are often struggling with and responding to the same social, political, economic, and ecological pressures.

But before we get to that, I have to ask you about the current events that remain fixed at the forefront of our attention. We are watching with horror and grief at what's happening in Ukraine, and I'm sure that this is looming large in your work as well. Would you share how Religions for Peace is thinking about the situation and about what might be the role of religious institutions and interfaith institutions in addressing the conflict in Ukraine? It's a conflict that may not appear overtly religious in its causes, yet when we consider the active support that the invasion has received from the Russian Orthodox hierarchy, I think we have to consider the religious incentives for the war as much as the possibility for interreligious and ecumenical solidarity in intervening to end it.

Azza Karam: Thank you, Aaron. It's a joy to be in conversation with you. To be honest, the war in Ukraine is a heartbreak for me – on professional, personal, and general human levels. There are some obvious reasons for this: we have a war in Europe *again*, after the devastation of the first and second World Wars. But it's also heartbreaking because this conflict is massively impactful on the rest of the world as well, where we are now talking about global food insecurity. For the longest time we have been worried about food security in certain parts of the world, but now we are talking about the very real incidence of *global* food insecurity; and this is while we are still facing a pandemic that has devastated our public health systems, while we are facing a

massive and unsolved crisis in our environment. This war, which a few guys have decided to wage, is now hurting everybody – not only the people of Ukraine whose lives have been upended – even more than they have already been hurt and are hurting.

And there is another reason that this conflict is proving to be a professional heartbreak for me: it has to do with the way that the Christian leaders are behaving. Not only the way that Patriarch Kirill is behaving – for what it's worth, I don't think that he is "Putin's altar boy," as the Pope so colorfully put it. No, I actually think that it's the other way around, that Putin is Kirill's altar boy. This vision of the religious leader being the stooge for the political leader is such a myopic and quite frankly false vision; historically, especially in the world beyond western Europe, the political leaders are the ones who have been seeking to be in the pockets of the religious leaders, rather than the other way

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around. Even our notion of nation-states is an inheritance from the original religio-political empires – remember the Austro-Hungarians? And the Ottomans? But we are still living in this time of imperialistic religious imaginaries, so to assume that it is the secular establishment that is using the religious is to do a huge disfavor to all of us as we attempt to understand what is happening today.

AH: In other words, the metaphysical argument at work in the Russian hierarchy's support of this war in Ukraine is larger than the specific goals of the current invasion. As you're suggesting, it is a vision of sanctified culture and politics that goes back hundreds of years, back to Byzantium or further. And it's persuasive – not only in Russia, I would note...

AK: Exactly. A few weeks ago, I published an op-ed asking: "Are we sure that *all* the other religious leaders think that Kirill is wrong in what he's using as justification for this war? Are we really sure?" Moreover, what leads us to believe that this is the case, as much as we would like to believe it? I think we have to reconsider this assumption, because of the ways that other religious leaders are approaching the conflict. Many of them may be keeping quiet precisely because they recognize that Kirill is saying out loud what they may be thinking or wish they could be saying as well.

But I said that the professional and personal disappointment of the present situation is related more broadly to how Christian leaders are behaving, and this is for another reason as well. Earlier on in the conflict, Religions for Peace maintained that interchurch discussions are not sufficient, given the universal ripple effects of the war. While there is certainly an ecumenical crisis here between the Russian and Ukrainian churches, and of course there should be inter-Christian consultations on making peace, why not come

together much more broadly as well? This is not just an Orthodox Christian or an inter-Christian crisis, this is a human crisis. The violence in Ukraine is not happening in isolation. It is affecting everybody, and let's remember also that there are other conflicts – in Myanmar, in the DRC, in Ethiopia – that are so painful to observe but that may also offer insight and perspective if only we can look collaboratively and learn from one another. Religious institutions and faith-based organizations, and religious communities more generally, are *suffering* and therefore have a critical role to play in speaking up about the human costs of all such conflicts. Why don't we consider, collaboratively, how our different institutions are living through conflict? What can we do to help one another? What can we do to pull each other out of the current morass that we're in, and perhaps pull our own communities out while we're at it? It is high time for this conversation, and there's no excuse not to have it just because we may worry that our institutions will be implicated in the causes and incentives of conflict. After all, every faith tradition says that it is good and proper to meet, to consult, to consider in community what ought to be done – and our human community contains a multitude of perspectives that ought to be considered, especially in so grave a circumstance as a war that threatens global food security.

But when this idea was put forward, that Religions for Peace could host a gathering of religious leaders to discuss and attempt to intervene in the crisis, I was told in no uncertain terms, from the Orthodox side: "Really, it is none of your business, this is a European Christian matter." And I took this to mean, though it was not spoken in these terms: "We don't want to air out our dirty laundry too much. And besides, even if we were to air out our laundry, it wouldn't be with the likes of you."

AH: If we are to have a multi-lateral conversation of the sort that you're suggesting, a conversation around the shared problems, the shared priorities, the global picture that is affecting us all – this possibility, promising though it may seem, already requires a kind of cosmopolitan way of thinking about our responsibility to each other beyond our own borders. Such a perspective simply may not be shared by the very people we're seeking to have around the table. It would also seem to me, if this kind of approach is being proposed but immediately rebuffed, as you're saying – this sense of "what business is it of yours?" – then that's worrying evidence of a rejection of the right of multinational, interreligious organizations like Religions for Peace even to ask for a public, shared accounting of what's happening in any given context.

I'm not saying I agree with it, but I do understand the perspective that, with a situation like the one in Ukraine, the

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only kind of conversation with the glimmer of a possibility for breakthrough is a narrower interchurch gathering (like the pan-Orthodox WCC Assembly pre-meeting that took place in Cyprus this past May, with representatives from all the Orthodox churches, including the Russian church) – a closed-door conversation that does not need to go public with the anguished tensions or internecine power politics animating the conflict.

AK: And there is plenty of value added by such closed-door conversations – in certain situations, at certain moments, for addressing certain specific goals. In no way am I suggesting a lesser importance to ecumenical conversations in this intra-religious register, because that level of conversation, with the kind of granularity and familiarity that it enables, has to be active all the time. But I also think that such intra-religious deliberations *are not sufficient*. We have to be smart enough and wise enough and big-hearted enough to attend seriously to the intersections of any such intimate conversations with the wider ecumenical conversation, and with the interreligious or multireligious community where our internal concerns may meet with illuminating recognition or resistance. As far as I'm concerned, in light of my thirty-five-year career working with different religions around the world, it is well-established that – especially when things are so fraught internally between the people of the same religion – we do need to make sure to have a quiet, safe space where we can talk honestly with one another, but we also need to be able to have a version of these difficult conversations among ourselves *with others present*. In times of tremendous tension, this is very helpful and can bring in a totally different energy or dynamic to internal conversations that otherwise can run aground on old assumptions or grievances.

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Now, those observing others might be from other branches of your same religion (as was so important, for example, at the Second Vatican Council), but even better when they are others who come from other faith traditions entirely and have no stake in your particular tensions, except in a philanthropic sense that your troubles are their concern out of love for human integrity and peace. There may be nothing that will benefit them directly in whether your tensions and disagreements are resolved or not. But they become part of that spirit of engagement with you, and all parties are in the end enlarged by being together in this capacity, taking care and offering support in one another's moments of crisis. By the way, this is Mediation 101 when it comes to political conflict – yes, it is important to bring together representatives of the two parties who are in deep conflict, but it is crucial also to have someone from the outside who wants to serve as witness to the testimonials of each party's pain and grief and anger. I believe that there is tremendous value, deep spiritual value, in this kind of accompaniment and witness – not at the expense of or instead of the intra-conflict conversation, but alongside that conversation and as a resource for widening its perspective and reimagining its terms of engagement.

So it's not an either/or. And I think the challenge that we're all confronted with – even in the political spaces, not just in the explicitly religious spaces – is that we tend to think in binary terms. *Either* it has to be an internally closed Orthodox space and conversation, *or* it's going to be a wide-open, multilateral free-for-all. But the truth of our lives is that our Creator has created all of us in a way that is not so reductive. Would it really have been difficult for God to create a simple and unified group of people with no reason for disagreement? The diversity of our creation, even though it is often difficult and often painful, is itself full of meaning and full of wisdom; but we resist this diversity, we block it out when the going gets tough, even though by doing this we are blocking out a core message of all our faith traditions, which is that mediation through difference is good and is a means of our deeper self-knowledge as much as of deeper understanding of the created world.

AH: You're calling our attention to one side of the coin – a very important insight about the value of interreligious witnessing and interreligious presence when it comes to specifically ecumenical crises. But I know it goes the other way as well – and this is one of the things about which I'm most eager to hear from you. That is, from your perspective as a leader of a multi-religious organization for peacebuilding, where do you see the contribution that specifically intra-religious ecumenical bodies or instruments (such as the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, national councils of churches or even the World Council of

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Churches, and so forth) are making to *inter*-religious peace-building? How do those kinds of ecumenical organizations support the work that you're doing? And at the same time, how often is the work of Religions for Peace directly hindered by ecumenical challenges – either by the disunity and mistrust themselves that ecumenical bodies attempt to resolve, or else by insular or parochial efforts to resolve those antagonistic conditions?

AK: This is important. Actually, I think that last part of your question answers the first part of your question. What I've noticed very clearly is how much this situation in Ukraine has deepened (or maybe, just revealed) the navel-gazing that is taking place within different religious communities – not just within the ecumenical community, by the way. There's a sense of *not having time* for interreligious conversations, a sense that those kinds of engagements are luxuries that have to be deferred until the more immediate crises are resolved – as if such resolution were forthcoming, and as if the issues we have to deal with in our own midst are so consuming that we can't even think about the interreligious context in which they take place.

It's interesting, though – there were two kinds of reactions to the suggestion that Religions for Peace could convene a multi-religious forum on Ukraine. One reaction, as I've mentioned, was from church leaders who suggested that this is really a European Christian affair, with no need for broader discussion. And what they did not say outright but very clearly implied is that this is a European, Christian, *male* affair. That was one reaction. But the other response was more specific, coming from certain of our Roman Catholic brethren, who argued that, really, a diplomatic solution here should be the business of the pope. It's the pope's prerogative and special ministry to sort out conflicts by serving as a kind of universal mediator, by setting the terms for mediation – especially in conflicts that have a kind

of religious intonation to them, but in other conflicts as well. So, with Ukraine: if this Kirill is a bad guy, if we are faced with a bad actor at this highest level of religious authority, then we need to rely on another religious leader with equivalent or superior authority. Pope Francis is the one who can resolve this situation. But where did this idea come from? Why should the solution be a contest of wills between individual men representing rival concentrations of power?

AH: For one thing, it's presuming that Francis' exertion of authority as a kind of global representative for peace would be met with anything other than derision and defiance on Kirill's part. It strikes me that the suggestion that Francis is the one best suited to broker peace in Ukraine reflects a lack of understanding of the ecumenical discord that is less visible but far more ancient than the Ukrainian conflict. Neither pressure from the pope in the position of international, universal diplomat, nor for that matter pressure from an international collective of religious leaders from many faiths, seems likely to move the needle on Russian Christo-imperial imaginaries. These may even be taken as evidence of the essential correctness of the vision that the “Russian world” alone preserves, and must continue to preserve with all its strength of arms, the holiness and truth that have been lost or corroded in the fallen, overbearing “West.”¹

AK: That's brilliant. And exactly right. But remember, this argument about the pope as universal mediator comes straight out of the encyclicals of the last few popes, but maybe especially from the encyclicals of Pope Francis (like *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti*) that quite benevolently frame the human community as a common family in a shared household – a household which requires, presumably, some coherent magisterial management. In *Laudato Si'*, for instance, Francis is not speaking about a specifically Catholic issue (regardless of the appeal to Catholic intellectual tradition); he is speaking about the environment, which is literally everyone's oxygen, everyone's water. Many people talk about *Laudato Si'* as an amazing document that articulates an expansive and humane vision that can be an ecumenical and interreligious touchstone, and so forth, and that's all true – but what it *also* does is set forth a clear understanding that the Vatican, and especially the popes, can and should play starring roles as world leaders that are both capable and authorized to negotiate on behalf of “all people of good will.” The pope's negotiating power and vision for humanity are asserted as a standard currency for the rest of the world.

AH: I hear you identifying a tension between this assertion of benevolent authority on the part of the Vatican and the more multilateral approach of organizations like Religions for Peace. It reminds me of the intellectual ten-

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sion between Vatican II inclusivism and a more pluralistic mentality that would approve of the Catholic opening of windows to the world and addressing “all people of good will,” but would suggest that it is still essentially self-centered and self-serving by contrast with a polycentric perspective that does not determine in advance that *we* have the solution to *your* problems. Is that a fair comparison?

AK: Well, let me be clear – in most cases, such peacemaking endeavors by the Holy See are extraordinarily welcome. I’m not upset about the pope seeking a role as global peacemaker *per se*, I’m simply looking at it analytically and trying to understand what’s entailed and what may not be spoken explicitly. If you read the preamble of *Laudato Si’* and compare it with the preamble of the Sustainable Development Goals Agenda, you see that they are almost identical in their values and concerns, although the SDG’s preamble lists specific goals that are different from those of the encyclical. But note: one document was written after deliberations by 193 governments, and written for 193 governments, and the other is written by the Vatican, presuming an openness to the wisdom of the world but without such a deliberative process. The fact that they are so similar in their objectives and positioning is a huge indicator of the extent to which the Holy See sees itself as a global interlocutor and leader in a position of global, interreligious, and transreligious authority.

By the way, that positioning is often embraced by other religious leaders – it’s not just unilaterally asserted. For instance, note how Grand Imam Ahmad al-Tayyeb of al-Azhar wanted to have a co-written document with the pope – there’s a commitment here to position himself as an equal, to issue statements of moral leadership on equal footing, and this already presumes that the authority asserted by the Vatican is valid. He’s saying, in effect: I like what you’re saying and doing, and I accept the validity of what you’re doing, *and* I’m your peer in doing it. Let’s be peers on this global stage, shall we? That message remains subliminal in these collaborations, but it’s very important to understanding the implications of the Document on Human Fraternity – which in turn becomes a jumping-off point for *Fratelli Tutti*. So all of this is part of the dynamics of our contemporary interreligious space for collaboration.

But to go back to your question: yes, there is too often an introverted perspective taking place among our ecumenical friends – whether within their own churches or within interchurch organizations like the WCC – and it does have the potential to generate obstacles for interreligious peacebuilding. It’s understandable that someone would believe that the crisis of the moment is really a European Christian problem, it’s understandable as an instinct, but it’s a serious problem if they don’t quickly change their minds once they hear that – for example, in my country of Egypt, and

in India, and elsewhere – the price of bread is skyrocketing because of the conflict in Ukraine, as is the price of oil, which is still quintessential to life in most parts of the world. People around the world are going hungry – how dare they call this a European affair and ask the rest of us to stay out of it? If it’s not ignorance, then it’s arrogance. This isn’t just about Europeans killing Europeans, Christians killing Christians – this is about a crisis in Europe also devastating the rest of the world, *again*. You had better believe this is our business too!

People around the world are going hungry – how dare they call this a European affair and ask the rest of us to stay out of it? If it’s not ignorance, then it’s arrogance.

But my point isn’t to blame people – I think we have to be empathetic and recognize that there is a deeply injured pride at stake – a sense of Christian pride in the success of several decades of ecumenical rapprochement, even if this pride is sometimes rooted (probably unconsciously) in Christian supremacy. That is, it’s fine to view Muslims as terrorist others who are naturally inclined to keep killing themselves and everyone else, but all of a sudden – oh, the shame of it – we are fighting each other? What will the Muslims think?

AH: We see this quite clearly, and repeatedly, in the way that public media tend to represent the Ukraine conflict. Reporter after reporter, pundit after pundit – and maybe this is just the low opinion they have of their audiences, but nevertheless – says something like, “This is just unimaginable, of course we would have expected to see fighting like this in Syria, but to see it in Europe, how could this be?”

AK: As if the First and Second World Wars didn’t begin in Europe! The problem is when injured pride results in a dangerous closing-off to possibilities of dialogue or collaboration that might make a real difference. That’s when we start saying – look, this is our business, we’re going to deal with it, and we’re not going to listen to anyone else, and we don’t need anyone else listening in. We’ll lick our own wounds, and they’re not for you to see or be part of healing – especially *you*, who come from that part of the world that we were so ready, able, and willing to use for our own benefit. All of that remains unsaid, and yet it is almost palpable in the atmosphere of all these conversations.

What is interesting is that we have also tried to approach these matters from the Muslim side. I went to certain Muslim authorities and asked if they would be willing to host this conversation, since the European Christian communities have been reluctant to work with Religions for Peace – would the Muslim leaders host a multireligious conversation and invite their Christian brothers to the table? And the response was, in effect – yes, we can, but you need to stay out of it! Of course it was all said very politely, but the takeaway was the same – these conversations are the province of established, male authorities, not of upstart egalitarian networks with substantial women’s leadership. In the Muslim world, however, there’s one important difference: the religious leaders won’t move a muscle until they get the go-ahead from their respective state governments. In Europe and in the US, Christian organizations can go about their business without consulting anyone – they actually regularly override governmental concerns – but Muslim authorities cannot act without governmental support.

AH: That’s fascinating. Do these governments also see what’s happening as a primarily Western concern? Such that the prospect of peace talks or even just a symposium on the global ripple effects of what’s happening would fall into a more diplomatic sphere in need of governmental authorization?

AK: No, actually, not at all – they get that this war is existential for them as well. Remember that there’s a history and a memory in our bones of how Europe has fundamentally shaped life, politics, indeed religion in the Middle East. So much so that we are spending a great deal of energy on trying to “decolonize” our very imagination, our understanding of ourselves! That history of colonialism hasn’t gone anywhere.

AH: Right – those same national governments wouldn’t even exist if not for European nation-building projects, whether in terms of carving up the Middle East, or the so-called Scramble for Africa...

AK: Exactly! So the knowledge that this conflict is integral with our own existence, that this is hurting us deeply and is certainly not an exclusively Christian problem – that doesn’t need to be argued. I have to argue about this with Europeans, it seems, but there’s no question for any of the leaders from Central Asia or the Middle East or Africa that this *is* their problem too. I think the issue is, instead, that precisely *because* there’s an understanding that this conflict is of existential importance for our societies, the governments are not going to let nongovernmental organizations or religious institutions move one centimeter without their authorization.

AH: This is a good reminder that we’re never just talking about interchurch conversations or interreligious conversa-

tions; rather, all these delicate gestures at peacemaking are always tangled up with economic concerns, tangled up with military movements, tangled up with diplomatic negotiations – and opportunities to jockey for geopolitical power – on the part of national governments. This is revealed as soon as we scratch the surface on any of the public statements or hand-extending, but it may not be generally known how religious and interreligious efforts at diplomacy never get to be *only* religious in their concerns or motives.

AK: Exactly. There is a long, long history here – a remarkable entrenchment of religious institutions, certainly not least the Catholic Church, in every country that was originally a colony where religious authorities sought to “bring light” to benighted natives. And this is an ongoing history, not something that has been severed and can be left behind – for God’s sake, we’re still discovering mass graves in Canada! And church leaders are dragging their feet about apologizing to the indigenous communities?

AH: The involvement of church institutions in the kinds of assimilation-or-extermination strategy we see across the Americas, elsewhere as well, goes beyond tragic. How can we be surprised that there is so little institutional will to look honestly at the history of church involvement or even oversight in colonial extraction, nation-building, genocide? It’s excruciating to have these realities dragged into the light, and the shame that accompanies (well, should accompany) such a reckoning can’t simply be waved away. If we’re creative about it, that shame might itself be a productive wave-length for ecumenical engagement and solidarity. But like you’re saying, we’re not unequivocally on the far side of all this history, not in a safely enlightened place from which we can look back on our vicious forebears without implicating ourselves. We see the endurance of this history in the catastrophic cruelty with which the humanity of indigenous people has been dismissed, but we see it more broadly as well, in how anti-Judaism is baked into the self-constitution and self-understanding of the church, and in how the construction of Islam as the enemy at the gates is baked into European cultural values. We see it in the Russian metaphysical project of being a New Byzantium, the last refuge of truth and holiness against a godless, deviant West and a rampaging Islam in the East. These are old, old stories, and they’re still very much with us.

This has been a very fruitful conversation, but let me shift our focus a bit. There’s so much ink being spilled (not least in the pages of *Ecumenical Trends*) and so much public conversation about how the difficulty of dialogue in our moment, the difficulty of breaking through some of these old divisions and old disagreements, is rooted in something we tend to call *polarization*, or *tribalism*, or (more rarely, but maybe more precisely) *sectarianism*. There seems to be

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a consensus that our societies are divided in some significant, obstructive, and perhaps intensifying way. From your perspective, given the kinds of bridge-building work that Religions for Peace is involved with, is this kind of language helpful? Or might it obscure more than it reveals, in light of the dynamics of conflict we've been discussing?

AK: It is important to name clearly the things that are hurting. It is important to face where the harm we experience is coming from and to articulate our pain, especially when others are causing or exacerbating or ignoring or benefiting from it. And so we are always looking for names to render our pain in three dimensions, so to speak – often inadequately, but the attempt is necessary. For example, I think this is one of the things most significant about the Black Lives Matter movement, and I understand that people disagree about this, but frankly, simply saying, insisting, that “Black lives matter” is part of naming the pain of existing in a society that does not recognize one's full humanity. And the same goes for discussions of division and polarization... these terms easily become talking points, empty signifiers, and yet they are naming real pain, real harm being done every day. There are open wounds in society – wounds which fester within the religious communities too, by the way – and the metaphor of “division” is not an inappropriate one to name this experience of having a civic body torn by political extremism, by white supremacy, by economic exploitation, and so forth.

AH: That's a helpful way of seeing it, that such terms aren't merely being imposed by social and political theorists on our society but they are emerging organically, as it were, as an inadequate but resonant way of expressing shared experience. And I think it's especially important to recognize how, as you say, the wounds here do not end at the doors of religious communities. Another article in this issue of *Ecumenical Trends*, by Fr. David Couturier, uses the metaphor of “connective tissue” as a way of describing the corrosion of social trust – like arthritis breaking down the cartilage between joints, causing the constant pain of bones grinding on one another. And that's not a diagnosis solely of civil society or of American politics – the religious communities too are hurting deeply and hurting themselves deeply because they get so caught up in recapitulating (and often, helping to generate) the demonization and division that are everywhere in the civic atmosphere. I think this is one of the deep disappointments that we see in the ecumenical movement, such as it is today – that, at the same time as “progress” is being made in terms of inter-denominational rapprochement, if we widen our focus just a little bit we see that these successes, satisfying though they are, serve mostly to re-knit together eroded trust *on the same side* of much deeper divides that are scarcely being addressed at all, and certainly not being addressed adequately.

AK: This is very important. You're inspiring me to think in a different way about this – but also to make the point that where we have pain – this “arthritis” grinding of bones, to use Couturier's metaphor – is not at the point of encounter between wildly different traditions but in the spaces of some similarity, where we feel there to be *insufficient* similarity. You are like us – but not enough. You are like us – but we are a more adequate version of what you claim to be. And what we see in these spaces, as we do when reflecting on the ecumenical dynamics of the war in Ukraine, is that the ecumenical world (or worlds – there are of course “ecumenical” spheres of division and rapprochement among the different formations of Islam, of Buddhism, of Judaism, and so forth, though they may well not use this term) has a lot of healing to do, a lot of internal dissonance.

AH: I think this is spot on – it's one of the reasons that ecumenical conversations and efforts can be far more fraught, more painful, more glacial in their movement, than interreligious conversations with less at stake in terms of the deep identities of those involved. It's one reason that, as I've noted elsewhere, ecumenical exhaustion often lurks in the background of even very promising interreligious engagement.²

AK: Yes. And when we see this, we have to make a choice. We can say, well, those are internal problems – you Christians are facing schism over this or that, or communication and communion between Russians and Greeks have broken down, and that's too bad, but it's for you to figure it out. Or, we have an opportunity to say, wait a minute, this sounds so familiar to what's going on in the Jewish world, in the Muslim world, in the Hindu or the Buddhist world... And if we are empathetic and caring, as our religious traditions teach us we must be, our hearts go out to one another when we see one another suffering – can we not then see this crisis as an opportunity to come together, to juxtapose insights from different contexts and bring the different languages of God together, to offer whatever we can from what is best in our storehouses of wisdom for the sake of alleviating one another's suffering?

I believe this is more than an opportunity, Aaron – it is an imperative. It is what is being demanded by our moment, *not* because religions are cure-alls, but precisely because religions constitute spaces where we suffer, where our suffering can be known and endured and transformed as well.

AH: That's very wise. Our human suffering – when we are well enough formed by our traditions to be moved to compassion by it – can represent a common ground that is more fundamental to who we are than even the architectures of ideas and ways of life that result in our being so profoundly different from one another.

It strikes me that, for a network like Religions for Peace, such attention to and solidarity around shared suffering (or witnessing to one another's suffering, or posing questions out of one's own experiences of suffering to one another, however you'd want to describe it) have the makings of a methodology for beginning to knit together the eroded social trust we've been speaking about, particularly in societies that are deeply divided and that struggle to achieve any kind of real public communication on any subject that can be turned into competing soundbites. But my worry is – and I hope you can assuage this worry! – that all of this patient, empathetic, intercommunal conversation that you're talking about, which comes from a place of compassion and proceeds with the grace of learning from shared suffering, is building social trust between those who already are inclined to trust one another and care for one another, even as the divide continues to widen with all those who are *not* interested in taking part in such connective, cosmopolitan measures, who might even see them as sinister or demonic. To what extent are peacebuilding measures like the ones we are discussing just preaching to the choir?

AK: So, the beauty of Religions for Peace is that it is concerned not merely with the fact *that* religious communities must come together, for all the reasons we have discussed, but also with *how* they do so as well. The organization has a significant legacy of bringing communities together for concrete, collaborative initiatives, ways of serving together that make an impact *even if* there are plenty of people in our societies who do not see the merit of them or even seek to undermine them. As you rightly point out, that is its own much more difficult question, but we cannot let ourselves be paralyzed and prevented from making a difference, together, until somehow everyone is on the same page.

Without in any way diminishing the horror and suffering it has wrought, COVID as a global pandemic has actually contained a blessing as well, because it has forced interreligious councils to hop up from sitting and debating with each other about the politics (which they're very good at, just like any other politically-involved entity) and to recognize that our communities all need A, B, C, and they need them now, because in fact we're facing exactly the same thing, albeit often in sharply asymmetrical ways. When the lockdowns happened, there were fear and grief of course, but there was also a moment of blissful clarity: "Wait a minute, no food, no water, no money? Okay, let's get our act together, and I'm not just going to go and serve my own community, and you're not just going to go and serve yours – how are we going to do this together?" We just had to get on with it – and this kind of joint service is in fact the essence of the mission for which we are created for human beings: to serve each other, to love each other fiercely and relent-

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lessly, and to do so *together*. It's nonsense that we should each do this only with our own community.

As became blindingly clear during COVID: no one is safe until everyone is safe. That's the case with the pandemic, and it's the case with our climate catastrophe – if the coral reef isn't going to survive, the rest of us aren't going to be able to eat. These realities pay no attention to national borders or religious doctrines, so we'd better get over ourselves and our pride and our little grievances, because we're looking at hunger, disease, and heatstroke on an unimaginable scale. *That's* what interreligious networks of collaboration need to reckon with and equip people, communities, and governments to address, and if there are some people who are never going to get with the program, well – we can pray they will come around before the end, but we cannot afford to wait for them to do so. No one is safe until everyone is safe.

And this is it, this is the key: just as the Almighty created us in diversity, so too we find in every single religious scripture the invocation that we must work in service to one another, but *nowhere* does it say to only serve our own. Not a single faith tradition, not a single holy book says to serve your neighbor, but only if they look like you, talk like you, think like you. So the notion that we must work to serve together is intimately bound up with our salvation.

But again – when we actually get down to brass tacks, two challenges are always present (even beyond the constant scramble for resources to keep oil in the engines of these wonderful, collaborative interreligious networks): first, the internal challenge of resistance from many of the same leaders that are part of these networks, which is the temptation to say, wait, my church has already done X or Y or Z, and he hasn't done X or Y or Z in his mosque, so shouldn't he step up to the plate before I do any more? This kind of zero-sum negotiation prevents us from collaborating in any way that is deeper than surface level. And the other challenge is external, from the secular world that is telling us that multi-religious convocations and collaborations are vanity projects, or utopian wastes of time that eat up resources better spent on political, economic, or military activities.

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AH: I'm so glad you're bringing this up because it practically answers my next question, but I hope we can make the problem even more explicit. You've been speaking about the core approach of Religions for Peace being collaborative social action, shared service, working to bring healing into all the various areas of profound social division and dysfunction – and, specifically and deliberately, doing so together and bringing a dimension to the work that would not be available for communities undertaking it unilaterally. I take it, if I'm understanding you correctly (and I'm bringing my own background to this as well), that in the course of doing so together, and indeed *by* doing so together, this collaborative social action has the effect not only of enhancing interreligious understanding but also of cultivating a compassionate, hospitable way of being in the world. That is, these collaborations have more than a pragmatic exoteric goal of mitigating this or that social problem, because – as interreligious theorists like Raimon Panikkar and Catherine Cornille make clear – the interreligious work is itself a school for properly religious virtue, spiritual exercise, and holy attunement. Would you care to comment on this element of the work you are doing? What do you take to be the relationship between the outer work of shared service and peacebuilding, on the one hand, and the inner work of forming ourselves and our communities as more humble, empathetic, love-grounded human beings, on the other? Does working together interreligiously in shared service, reciprocal appreciation, and compassion for suffering beyond the walls of our own communities open something up within our own traditions that wouldn't otherwise be known or realized?

AK: That's a profound insight. We see this in the Qur'an, among other places; actually, it's in every faith tradition in some way or another, including in the indigenous religious traditions that are the first to say: "You want to

save yourself? Be one with the earth. Serve this earth. And if you pour yourself out in caring for the earth, you will find yourself." It's a simple and ingenious message, needed now more than ever. Now, obviously, if you're going to serve the earth, you have to serve one another – especially if you recognize (as the monotheistic traditions too often fail to do) that we are all creatures of the earth, utterly dependent on the earth, but also beings whose earthiness is holy. This is why it's so tragic when people try to serve "the earth" but ignore human beings, who are themselves earth and owed every bit of the dignity and love and service that is rightly owed to the whole of creation!

I would even take this insight a step further: when we serve the earth, and when we serve one another – *especially* when we do so beyond the boundaries that we have set for our own comfort around our own traditions and identities – we find God. And in the loving, selfless encounter with religious others, whom we are not incentivized to love by our own benefit, we find ourselves becoming at one with God, because God created us all and loves us all and needs us all to live together in peace and abundance, and so we find ourselves loving *as God loves* when we serve without limit, without merely serving those whom we take to be "our own kind." So you are quite right that, in taking on the labor and compassion of interreligious solidarity, we ourselves become people of greater faith.

AH: There's so much more we could get into here, but our time is short, and so I'd like to conclude by looking back and looking forward. This year, 2022, is a year of some very significant anniversaries that have been on our mind at GEII as we have considered different programming possibilities and features for *Ecumenical Trends* – anniversaries of moments of profound societal upheaval over the last one hundred years. In 1922, the Greco-Turkish War came to a devastating end with the burning of Smyrna and, subsequently, population exchanges of Greek Muslims and Turkish Christians that resulted in two ethnoreligious monocultures and unresolved traumatic antagonism between Greece and Turkey. In that same year, the conclusion of the Irish War of Independence gave way to dashed hopes and civil war, subsequently descending into decades of intercommunal violence (including the Bloody Sunday attacks in 1972). And also in 1972, we remember the nationalization of Sri Lankan Buddhism, leading among other things to thirty years of sectarian conflict in Sri Lanka.

All this is to say: we're in a moment of apprehending all these anniversaries, looking back and reflecting with sobriety and trying to take what lessons we can from these painful moments of deepening ethnoreligious division, and taking them up as we look again toward the future we are in the process of creating. So I'd invite you to reflect on

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any of these anniversaries specifically and the lessons you find there to be valuable for the present – but maybe more importantly, and more generally: in light of this tumultuous history of the last hundred years, do you find yourself hopeful about the future of interreligious engagement?

AK: Actually, I think these two questions are intimately connected. I love the way that you mentioned those particular moments in 1922 and 1972 that resonate so clearly with our present moment, and that have historical legacies that continue to fuel or condition our present moment. We know how history informs so much of what is possible in the present, what is reasonable to hope or fear for in the present – whether that’s the history of religious empires, the history of colonialism, the histories of violence between particular peoples or particular nations. It’s all fundamental to our understanding and praxis in the present, both political and religious, which again are intimately entwined and cannot be disaggregated.

I do believe that history has plenty to teach us, and it’s a tragedy when we fail to reflect on our history and continue to seek the lessons it expounds for the new situations in which we find ourselves. What else but this failure can explain how we continue to be at war, in spite of the catastrophic consequences of war, including for the victors? What else can explain the endurance of our remarkable, devastating social and economic inequalities that persist and persist, enriching their beneficiaries until, as we learn from history, they collapse under their own weight along with the decadent civilizations that have depended on them and presumed them to be self-evident?

So we fail again and again to learn from history, and it is, admittedly, hard to be hopeful when – in spite of all we should have learned by now – religion and politics continue to bring out the worst, rather than the best, in one another. In this collusion of religious and political *institutions* (not of religious and political *values*, which is another question entirely) we see the unleashing of forces that can only be called demonic, and frankly, it terrifies me. I’m not talking of some benighted foreign theocracy – we see it in Saudi Arabia, sure, but we also see it in America!

AH: Theocracy is a powerful temptation, one which can be resisted, but not without learning from the abscesses of our own history, and not without the humility born of authentic encounter with the otherness that does not so easily resolve into our self-serving narratives.

AK: Exactly. And are we learning this? What will it take to learn this? I do think there is a glimmer of hope in the fact that conversations about decolonization and intercultural education are now so widespread and open-hearted. There is a recognition, including in the societies that have long assumed that their ways of being were the universal

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standard, that we just might not have all the answers – seeing that, actually, things can get pretty rotten here too! – and that we therefore need to open up to one another and learn new ways of seeing, new ways of thinking, new ways of being human together – because we certainly can’t be human separately.

None of this is to say that the West is evil and that its only salvation is to denigrate or debase itself. It’s not to say that salvation is in abandoning oneself and one’s history and one’s traditions in favor of some other, putatively pure or just less problematic way of being – it’s not to say, as many have over the last century, well, the West is rotten, let’s flee to the mystical East! It’s to say that our working *together* is where hope can be found. My dirty laundry is not less dirty than yours – and maybe it’s uncomfortable for me to show it to you, or to see yours in turn, but it’s fundamentally that shared witness, and the humility necessary to undertake it in compassion and generosity, that will save us now.

AH: *Especially* if it makes us uncomfortable. Especially if it requires us to turn upside down the assumptions we’ve clung to – about ourselves, about one another, and about what will get us out of the messes of our own making.

AK: Yes. God help us, it is not easy. But we have to take heart, or we will lose what’s left of ourselves. Maybe it is surprising, but in spite of everything, I am hopeful. I am very tired. But I am hopeful. 📍

Notes:

1. On the contours of such a vision, and on the vigorous rejection of its validity by a wide range of Orthodox Christian leaders and scholars, see “A Declaration on the ‘Russian World’ (*Ruskii Mir*) Teaching,” *Public Orthodoxy*, March 13, 2022. <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2022/03/13/a-declaration-on-the-russian-world-ruskii-mir-teaching/>.

2. See Hollander, “Ecumenical and Interreligious,” in *Interreligious Studies: Dispatches from an Emerging Field*, edited by Hans Gustafson (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2020), 107.