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LEONARD SWIDLER'S CALL TO INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE REVISITED

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to trace a brief history of the attempts that have been made to promote inter-religious dialogue, to outline the accomplishments to date, and to scrutinize both the current challenges posed to this project, and the future requirements to be met if worldwide interfaith cooperation is ever to be achieved. When investigating current inter-religious interactions, it is critical not to neglect the polemical dimension, but to establish the causes for the disagreements, and to effectively remove them. Given the inevitability of religious transmission within families, educational systems worldwide must offer exposure to multiple worldviews and belief systems that accurately reflect the diverse societies and cultures around the globe. In order to liberate themselves from the grip of fanatical thinking, the youth should not only be instructed in the teachings of a single religion, but also be exposed to the origins of humanity's inclination towards religious beliefs and to the various ways in which these beliefs are expressed. This exposure, and the resulting newly-formed mentality will strengthen the response to Leonard Swidler's call for the endorsement of a Universal Declaration of Global Ethics and, together with this indefatigable supporter of inter-religious co-operation, we will finally be able to genuinely proclaim that we are living in an Age of Global Dialogue.

Key words: interfaith co-operation, polemical discussion, cognitive dialogue, intentionality, religious education, religiosity, ethical standards, peacemaking.

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1. Historical Considerations

As Leonard J. Swidler – founder and president of the Dialogue Institute, and professor of Catholic thought and inter-religious dialogue – clearly explains, the shift from "primary religions", which were "coterminous with" particular civilizations, to the religious absolutism that stemmed from ancient Greece, Israel, India, and China, characterizing the Axial Age (800–200 BCE), gave rise to universalist claims and proselytizing tendencies bound to create tension and conflicts (2013, 3-4). However, another transformation gradually commenced, albeit initially inconspicuously, with the emergence of the Enlightenment and Modernity, periods marked by the principles of liberty, rationality, historical awareness, and intellectual discourse (Swidler 2013, 3-4). At first, it attracted fragmented Christianity, pulling it towards a quest for increased cohesion in light of the rising intellectual demands posed by the Enlightenment and its resulting new academic fields: scientific history, anthropology, sociology, and psychology. This progressive trend gradually attempted to encompass all religions worldwide, ultimately leading to the emergence of the Age of Global Dialogue in the latter half of the 20th century (Swidler 2013, 6).

The commencement of modern inter-religious interaction can be traced back to the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, widely acknowledged as the catalyst for the establishment of formal inter-religious dialogue on a global scale. The significant surge in inter-religious interaction at the parliament was initiated by the Indian Hindu Swami Vivekananda and warmly supported by other religious leaders, among whom Indian Jain scholar Virchand Gandhi, Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhist Anagarika Dharmapala, and Japanese Zen Buddhist D.T. Suzuki (Swidler 2013, 6). The discussions thus initiated cleared the path for conversation among the religions of the world, strengthened by the later influx of the intra-Christian Ecumenical Movement, which had been prompted by two huge gatherings, namely the first International Conference of Life and Work, organized in Stockholm on August 19, 1925, and the first World Conference of the Movement for Faith and Order, held on August 3, 1927 (Swidler 2013, 4-5). Despite the Catholic Church's initial refusal, from the early 1920s to the 1960s, to participate in ecumenical dialogue, the situation improved during Vatican Council II (1962 – 1965), when *Unitatis reintegratio*, a "Decree on Ecumenism" (November 21, 1964), was promulgated, followed by *Nostra Aetate*, the "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" (October 28, 1965), and by *Dignitatis humanae*, the "Declaration on Religious Liberty" (December 7, 1965).

Not coincidentally, in 1964, Arlene Anderson Swidler and Leonard

Swidler founded *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (*JES*), the first peer-reviewed journal in the field of inter-religious dialogue. Its initial subtitle, "Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox", underwent progressive changes, following the addition of associate editors affiliated with various other religions, such as Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and so on, its archives bearing witness to the progress of the Inter-religious Dialogue Movement. According to Leonard Swidler (2013, 9), after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in November 1989, the world entered the Age of Global Dialogue. From 1990 to 1992, Swidler himself published no fewer than twelve books on interfaith co-operation.

Six years after the Al Qaeda attack on America, Islam made a significant contribution to worldwide interfaith dialogue, as 138 Muslim scholars and religious leaders from various countries issued – on October 13, 2007 – a remarkable public letter titled "A Common Word between Us", in which they extended an invitation to Christian leaders and scholars to engage in dialogue. This change of position was deemed comparable to the Catholic Church's complete and vigorous engagement in inter-religious dialogue, which had started with Vatican II, because – from then on – positive occurrences rapidly multiplied. For instance, following a meeting with Pope Benedict XVI, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia initiated a World Conference, which was meant to promote inter-religious discussion, organized from July 16 to 18, 2008 in Spain, location chosen due to its historical significance as a hub for inter-religious dialogue during the medieval Golden Age known as Convivencia. In addition, King Abdullah provided assistance and gave his endorsement to the creation of the King Abdullah Center for the Study of Contemporary Islam and the Dialogue of Civilizations, at Imam University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The name itself conveys a strong and unambiguous message: in order to be a committed Muslim in today's society, it is imperative to engage in discussion with other faiths and civilizations. One year later, in 2009, fourteen Islamic studies academics from Imam University went to the Dialogue Institute, the outreach division of *JES*, to study interfaith, intercultural, and international co-operation (Swidler 2013, 9).

Moreover, starting with March 2011, new Dialogue Institutes were successfully established in Baku – Azerbaijan, Sulaimani – Iraqi Kurdistan, Beirut – Lebanon, and Kinshasa – Congo. Furthermore, the renowned contemporary Confucian scholar Weiming Tu, who taught at Harvard University for many years, moved to Beijing University, in 2011, to establish the Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies, which focuses primarily on promoting the "Dialogue of Civilizations". Swidler (2013, 9-10) further explains that even non-believers are acknowledging the significance of the burgeoning interfaith conversation and aspire to participate in it, proving that inter-religious discussion has become culturally, academically, and religiously significant in multiple ways.

2. The Typology of Inter-religious Dialogue

Although it was more than two millennia ago that several Buddhist and Hindu thinkers first embraced a non-absolutistic epistemology, issuing warnings against exclusive worldviews, the concept of dialogue has gained popularity in prescribing the appropriate interaction between different religions only starting with the 1960s. This was due to "the relative cultural eclipse of those civilizations in the early modern period and the dominance of the Western scientific worldview" but, since the mid-1800s, Eastern thinking has gained significant recognition and influence in the Western world, and its influence seems to have been growing exponentially in the past few decades, which bodes well for the future of intercultural and interfaith dialogue (Swidler 2013, 11).

There have been multiple attempts made to classify inter-religious dialogue. As of 1984, according to the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, its four forms are the dialogue of: life, hands, head and heart:

a) The *dialogue of life,* where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.

b) The *dialogue of action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.

c) The *dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values.

d) The *dialogue of religious experience*, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute. (*Dialogue and Proclamation*, 1991)

Eric J. Sharpe (1974, 80-81) distinguishes between human, secular, discursive, and interior dialogue, Paul O. Ingram (2013, 390–391) uses a typology similar to the Catholic one, namely the socially engaged, the conceptual, as well as the interior dialogue, and Jeannine Hill Fletcher (2013, 180) also identifies only three models of dialogue: the activist one – mindful of intersectionality, the parliament one – relying on the idea of representation, and the storytelling model – a dialogue in the everyday. Leonard Swidler (2013, 5-6) also argues that there are three primary modes of inter-religious dialogue: that of the Heart – finding ways of appreciating and embracing the inner spirit and aesthetic manifestations of other religions, of the Head – seeking to gain a deeper understanding of the purpose of life from other faiths, and of the Hands – collaborating with others to improve the world we live in.

Religion, as a comprehensive belief system and set of values, is

inherently complete, self-contained and, therefore, distinguished by its inclination to clearly establish its distinctiveness; thus, from the standpoint of religious consciousness, the reasons why a believer might engage in discourse with followers of other religions are somewhat restricted, so it is crucial to clarify these motivations in order to fully comprehend the nature of inter-religious interaction (Melnik 2020, 54). Based on the criterion of "intention", which refers to the driving force behind religious adherents' interactions with one another, Sergey V. Melnik (2020) identified four distinct types of inter-religious dialogue: polemical, cognitive, peacemaking, and partnership. As he pertinently points out, the current categorizations and methodologies mostly center around the many manifestations of inter-religious dialogue, only occasionally addressing its objectives and other related factors, whilst the matter of motivation itself is often overlooked or not given due consideration. Insofar as religions insist on the originality of their own founders and holy writings, their customs should be seen not only as coexisting but also as opposing and contradictory worldview systems. Thus, a more accurate typology of interfaith dialogue can be established by taking into consideration factors such as the intention of the participants, the goals they set for themselves, the principles that drive their interaction, and the form it takes depending on the standing of the participants – for instance "high" / "middle" or "conceptual" / "grass root" levels (Melnik 2020, 54).

Although some scholars regard inter-religious dialogue as encompassing any type or level of productive interaction between different religious beliefs and practices, aimed to promote peaceful coexistence, or even to foster societal transformation (Cornille 2013, xii), not all types of interfaith interaction actually share characteristics such as a mutual respect and/or a willingness to be open to the potential of gaining knowledge from one another. As Melnik (2020, 56) argues, the assertion that the polemical discussion model is obsolete and virtually absent in contemporary interfaith relations appears questionable, although it may often hold true for scholarly discussions and for the inter-religious interaction conducted by authorities, which mostly takes on a diplomatic nature. Yet the question of the veracity of one's religion and the validity of its concepts remains pertinent and significant to ordinary individuals as well, since it encompasses the wide range of religious traditions, diverse forms of religious encounters, and the formation of novel religious movements. Hence, when examining contemporary interfaith interactions, it is crucial not to disregard the polemical dimension, which comprises various forms, ranging from disagreements among common adherents, to the writings of theologians that implicitly or explicitly engage in polemics with other religions (Melnik 2020, 56).

Melnik distinguishes between confrontational polemical dialogue and cognitive "truth-seeking" dialogue. The former is founded upon two

fundamental principles. On the one hand, a firm belief in the unparalleled distinctiveness of one's own religious faith and a conviction that, in some manner, adherents of all the other traditions are misguided and deceived. On the other hand, an unwavering determination to overcome the opposing party in the argument and to showcase the supremacy of one's own religion, while exposing the unfounded nature of the opponent's stance (Melnik 2020, 55). The latter springs from a genuine intellectual curiosity, driven by the desire to reach a deeper understanding of the ideas and concepts characterizing different religions, and from an eagerness to engage in discussions regarding the fundamental truths and the meaning of life, knowing that an exploration of various religious customs and practices will result in an enhanced comprehension of one's own beliefs (Melnik 2020, 56). Swidler (2013, 11-13) attributes the growth of inter-religious dialogue to the acknowledgment and advancement of the following interconnected principles related to knowledge and understanding:

- historicism – the understanding that concepts of truth are influenced by historical and cultural factors,
- sociology of knowledge – the recognition that thinking is shaped by social and historical contexts,
- limitations of language – the awareness that any statement is cast from "a particular standpoint", in language-specific thought-categories, offering a merely "perspectival" and, therefore, relational, view of truth,
- hermeneutics – the challenge of interpretation,
- intentionality – the emphasis on the action-oriented intention of the speaker,
- dialogue – the idea that cognition and thinking are inherently dialogical.

Nowadays, critical thinkers employ a macro-paradigm "characterized by historical, social, linguistic, hermeneutical, praxis and dialogic – *relational* – consciousness" (Swidler, 2004, 26).

Peacemaking, the third category identified by Melnik, is a distinct and autonomous domain within inter-religious dialogue. Whilst in the context of cognitive dialogue, cognition is regarded as the primary objective, and the ensuing harmonization of relationships is viewed as a by-product, within that of peacemaking dialogue, an enhanced knowledge of different religions is considered just a tool for fostering peace, rather than an ultimate objective, since the primary purpose of such a dialogue is to promote a harmonious coexistence among individuals of diverse religious beliefs (Melnik 2020, 57). The purpose behind peacemaking dialogue and partnership dialogue is quite similar, the emphasis being on the interplay between faiths as societal establishments, with a particular focus on strategies that guarantee their harmonious cohabitation and

progress. Yet, although the objectives behind these two types of dialogue share commonalities, it is important to distinguish between them. Peacemaking dialogue focuses on resolving problems – such as settling conflicts, maintaining peace, promoting mutual respect (Melnik 2020, 68), whereas partnership dialogue aims to promote cooperation among believers to achieve certain common goals, whether noble – helping various groups of people in need and solving environmental issues (Melnik 2020, 70), or ignoble, at least in the eyes of most secular community members – preserving or (re)instating particular religious-traditionalist value systems by denying rights to women, to non-heterosexuals, to non-believers, or even to other religious minorities. Thus, just like the goals of confrontational polemical exchanges, those particular objectives of partnership dialogue which are reprehensible from a human rights' point of view may alienate non-believers – an increasingly numerous part of the population worldwide, many of whom would otherwise be eager to participate in interfaith dialogue with the aim of putting an end to the marginalization and demonization directed against them. As interfaith activist Chris Stedman (2019) explains, it is desirable that "defending the nonreligious against sweeping rhetorical attacks" will become as automatic as addressing prejudice aimed at Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Pagan or Buddhist, as well as other – at times ostracized – communities.

3. Promising Accomplishments, Current Challenges, and Future Requirements

Leonard Swidler, initiator and promoter of the emerging movement toward global inter-religious dialogue and peace, drafted – at the beginning of the 1990s – the initial version of a Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic, in the hope that, once revised and eventually accepted by the entire spectrum of religious and ethical institutions, it will function as a minimum ethical standard for humanity to adhere to, similar to the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (2004, 32). The use of the term "ethic" rather than "morality" is truly inspired and bodes well for the success of the project. Although there is a considerable degree of overlap between what is understood by "moral principles" and, respectively, by "ethical standards", a distinction is drawn within religious, legal and academic communities. Both morality and ethics pertain to the discernment of the distinction between "good and bad" or "right and wrong", yet morality is often perceived as a subjective and individualistic concept, while ethics refers to "the standards of 'good and bad' distinguished by a certain community or social setting" (Grannan 2023). On the one hand, the concept of morality is often associated with Christianity in many Western communities, as moral theology holds a significant position within the church. On the other hand, not all the

world's religions are based on the exact same set of moral principles. This association, therefore, may discourage non-Christians from participating in dialogue and it will also constitute a reason for dismissing the involvement of non-believers in the project. As Arthur C. Clarke (1999, 360) pointed out, "the greatest tragedy in mankind's entire history may be the hijacking of morality by religion", because it leads to an unwarranted demonization of the secular community; moreover, since each religion insists on its own morality being the True One, theistic morality is much too relativistic a concept to ever represent a useful starting point for such a global project. Thus, Swidler's decision, to urge that a Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic soon be drafted, skillfully avoids the alienation – from the start – of prospective participants in the project, by using the less ambiguous yet more inclusive term "ethic", which, in the long run, might facilitate the reaching of an agreement among all the various communities, religious and secular alike.

There are, however, several significant challenges to the project: despite Swidler's laudable attempts to sketch the contents of the Declaration in terms as acceptable as possible for other religious communities, its inherently Christian bases are immediately apparent. And although the initial draft stands as an open invitation to all the world's religious and secular communities to contribute, and does not stake a claim to universality in its current form, "there is no hope of arriving at real global consensus from a starting point within one tradition", as Sallie B. King explains (1995, 213). In spite of her concerns pertaining to the project's "initial stance and the praxis lying behind that stance", King expresses her belief in the necessity of such an initiative. She argues that it would be most efficient to invite distinguished representatives from other religious traditions to participate in "a dialogue *toward* the articulation of a global ethic", since their perspectives on and phrasing of the topic are bound to vary significantly in each instance. Only when that specific condition is met, would it be appropriate to encourage everyone to actively seek a shared understanding and establish an overall framework of the issue (King 1995, 213).

King also insists on the urgency of the endeavor, pointing out that the first step should involve a dialogue between liberals and conservatives within the same religion, making specific reference to members of the various Christian denominations in the United States of America: "What is the point of discussion on a global level if we cannot talk across the fence in our own backyard?" (1995, 213). The main problems stem from the fundamentalist positions, since they ignore, exclude or condemn other religious traditions or worldviews and, thus, lead to an unwillingness to even engage in conversation, let alone join in collaborative projects. Since faith, ritual and spiritual involvement are "central, foundational aspects" of the lives and identities of fundamentalists, not only are they "strident and vigorous in their religiosity", and certain that they possess the One

True Faith, but they also "want everyone else to adopt their beliefs" (Zuckerman 2019, xv), as proven, for instance, by "the resounding rejection of secularism by resurgent Islamism" (Swidler 2004, 32).

Thus, religiously motivated violence continues to be a threat, even now, 76 years after the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was issued, and 43 years after the *United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief* was adopted, although both these documents aimed at enshrining the rights to freedom of religion or belief and the prohibition against discrimination on that basis. Systemic discrimination at the national level and widespread biased and discriminatory attitudes often enable and accompany direct violence against vulnerable belief communities, as Nazila Ghanea (2023) shows, this tragic situation being most evident in situations of armed conflict, such as the fraternization and collaboration of Catholic priests and nuns with the Hutu extremists during the Rwandan genocide against the Tutsis, the targeting of Christians by armed groups in certain regions of West Africa, the genocide carried out by the Islamic State against Yazidis, or the predicament of Rohingya Muslims. We might, as Swidler claims, have emerged from the "Age of Monologue", tentatively entering the "Age of Dialogue", yet obviously not all people are willing to enter interfaith dialogue in order to "expand, deepen, enrich each of their necessarily limited perceptions of the meaning of things" (2004, 30).

There are, however, as illustrated by the various case studies comprised in *The Wiley-Blackwell companion to inter-religious dialogue*, many examples of bilateral negotiation and co-operation that offer hope for a less religiously-motivated violence-ridden future. Although these are neither comprehensive, nor indicative of all the discussions that have been occurring throughout history, they provide a glimpse into the diverse worldwide conversations among various religious groups, encompassing written and spoken traditions, cultural and inclusive perspectives, both traditional and contemporary beliefs, major and minor faiths, as well as those centered around a deity and those without a belief in a higher power. Unsurprisingly, the earliest discussions are generally between religions that share some familial ties: Buddhism and Hinduism, Judaism and Christianity, Judaism and Islam, as well as Christianity and Islam, but there are also unrelated religions, such as Shinto and Buddhism, or Islam and Hinduism, which have a long history of reciprocal contact. Dialogue is typically more manageable between religions that have limited or no familial connection, since there is less need to reconcile conflicting perspectives and interpretations, or to overcome a history of mutual rejection: Hinduism and Christianity, Christianity and Buddhism, Christianity and Confucianism, Buddhism and Judaism, Hinduism and Judaism, or Confucianism and Judaism. Certain situations explored are entangled in profound and long-standing social and political conflicts, whilst other discussions occur only on a philosophical and theological

level, but each case study explores different aspects of the history of the debate, including influential thinkers and ideas, current developments, and potential future difficulties (Cornille 2013, xv). Prior to the 20th century, interactions between religions were mostly influenced by geographical closeness and the fluctuations of territorial expansion; yet, in the current era of globalization, talks can occur between any two or more religions, regardless of territorial or ideological differences (Cornille 2013, xvi).

It is precisely this context of globalization and multiculturalism which requires, now more than ever, that suitable steps be taken in order to nurture a change in mentality, especially for the younger generations, change that, in time, will further pave the way for highly-successful interfaith cooperation. This could be achieved by garnering the undeniable powers of education through the implementation of an integral study of religiosity, liberated from the rigid adherence to a certain religious text and, therefore, not influenced by a biased view towards one's own culture, a study that fosters not only religious, but also universally ethical ideals which strengthen humanity's inherent capacity for moral development. The majority of parents strongly insist that their children be fully engaged in a certain religion, which they believe to be the only true one. Consequently, religious education at home introduces children to a specific perspective on the world and to a collection of religious ideals that are presented as moral principles. Thus, to facilitate the progress towards peaceful religious pluralism, it is necessary to complement religious home-schooling with mandatory classes, at school, that expose children to a wide array of religious phenomena, encourage exploration of diverse cultural and artistic expressions of religion, and facilitate interaction and exchange of ideas with children from different religious backgrounds, including those who do not adhere to any religion. To thoroughly study religiosity from a young age is essential because, once personal values are formed, attitudinal values are also acquired, and during this process of acquiring values it can be ensured that the desired level of adaptability is achieved, one that promotes a person's integration in the constantly evolving multicultural world of today, characterized by religious pluralism. The syllabus and the course contents should be carefully designed to align with the proper developmental stage of the pupils and students. For instance, starting from the early years of education, children can be exposed to myths and legends from different cultures through age-appropriate books: board books, picture books, pop-up books, and coloring books. As they progress to secondary school, they can study Comparative Mythology in order to understand the concept of religious syncretism through illustrative examples, followed by the Philosophy of Religiosity in high school (Preda 2021, 121-124). This curriculum should aim to bridge the gap between history and religion, exposing learners to the existence of a variety of belief systems, to their

origins and evolution in time, including information related to their own religion, thus making them aware that there are many people, around the world, who hold, just as strongly and wholeheartedly, beliefs quite different from their own. This exposure will prevent them from adopting narrow-minded thinking patterns and it will also contribute to the development of their cultural awareness and critical thinking skills, enabling them to fully embrace the others' presence in the social sphere, while fostering an environment marked by inclusivity, compassion, and fairness.

Although Swidler (2004, 37) had insisted that "a document merely handed down from above will lack the 'ownership' of those who it is to influence and guide", so dialogists must make sure that the voices of the oppressed can also be "heard and heeded" (Swidler 2004, 29), this has not always been the case, individuals at the grassroots level being often "neglected as deemed inadequate or absent" (Swamy 2016, 207). The powers of education must not be underrated in this respect either, because the considerable knowledge and the significant mentality change it will bring forth can ensure greater efficiency when implementing Swidler's suggestion that religious, secular, political, semi-political and non-governmental organizations, as well as individuals, be urged "to bring insights and formulations up from below" so they can then be synthesized, and used to inform the endeavors of those directly engaged in inter-religious dialogue at higher levels (Swidler 2004, 38). The newly-formed mentality will fully prepare all youth, not merely the elites, to embrace the three primary modes of inter-religious dialogue identified by Swidler (2013, 5-6), since they will already have partaken in the emotional exploration of the inner essence and artistic expressions of other faiths, will also have engaged in the intellectual pursuit of comprehending the meaning of life from different religious perspectives, and will have acknowledged the need for a practical engagement with others to safeguard peace in our shared world. Consequently, the new educational paradigm is bound to reduce the instances of confrontational polemical interactions, increasing the likelihood of cognitive truth-seeking dialogue, followed by effective peacemaking dialogue.

4. Conclusions

Inter-religious dialogue, a noble endeavor, upon which Leonard Swidler embarked more than seventy years ago, and towards which much effort has been dedicated by many other enlightened minds, is neither outdated, nor out of reach. Whilst the recent scientific and technological boom has lessened religion's instrumental utility, the process of secularization being likely to accelerate in many regions around the globe over the 21st century, mostly driven by the increasing prevalence of automation, "religion's powerful grip on humanity seems, in many parts

of the world, still unrelenting" (Preda 2024, 121), as "religion is polarizing across world regions" (Jackson et al. 2023). Given the intensification of religiously-motivated conflicts, the fact that interfaith cooperation, an essential requirement for our survival on this planet, is not more widespread, after all this time, suggests that essential steps must be taken to ensure the success of the project in future.

That fundamentalism often leads to religiously-motivated aggression is extremely worrying, thus the role of leaders in both political and religious communities needs to be reassessed, and so does their self-perception as advocates for their beliefs within the framework of global rule of law and religious diversity. This is an essential requirement, because religious fundamentalist states would never integrate the study of religiosity into a new educational paradigm to establish a foundation for a humanist pro-social education meant to safeguard society against divisive forces such as religious intolerance, rigid beliefs, and extremism. Since this type of educational program "is a quiet instigator of interreligious dialogue at the level of praxis" (Mitias 2021, 25), its implementation is essential in order to ensure that, as Swidler proposed, a Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic is eventually adopted, declaration that will function "as a kind of 'constitutional' set of basic and middle ethical principles from which more detailed applications can constantly be drawn" (Swidler 2004, 36).

The emphasis, both in the educational program and in the Declaration's design, will be on universal ideals, meant to foster pro-social conduct, characterized by reverence, receptiveness, and even endorsement of other groups. To prevent or, at least, to discourage stereotyping, discrimination, the dissemination of deceptive information, racism, ethnocentrism, bigotry, and prejudice is one of the most constructive actions that a society can take, whether directly or indirectly (Mitias 2021, 24-25). When both personal awareness and social awareness are centered on spiritual principles based on universal human rights, rather than on a specific religious text, differences will no longer be seen as intimidating and frightening, but rather as complementary characteristics that are valued and appreciated for their enriching qualities. Thenceforth, it may be expected that numerous other bilateral conversations between global faiths will ensue, apart from the ones already in existence, and that these dialogues will continue to grow, ultimately involving more and more communities, religious as well as secular. Thus, hopefully, the moment shall come when, together with Leonard Swidler, the tireless advocate of inter-religious co-operation, we will truly be able to declare that ours is an Age of Global Dialogue.

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