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- [Member churches](#)
- [What we do](#)
- [Get involved](#)
- [Resources](#)
- [Press centre](#)

- [English](#)
- [Deutsch](#)
- [Français](#)
- [Español](#)
- [Português](#)
- [한국어](#)
- ...



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Christian, Muslim leaders agree to stand against religious extremism

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The role of religions in promoting peace and countering violence was discussed during a two-day dialogue between the Muslim Council of Elders and the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva, Switzerland from 30 September to 1 October. Two sessions of talks, hosted by the WCC, involved presentations and discussions on key aspects of peacebuilding and interreligious dialogue, paying special attention to combating religious extremism leading to violence in many parts of the world.

The dialogue commenced with presentations by Dr Agnes Abuom, moderator of the WCC Central Committee, and WCC general secretary Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit.

Religious leadership, both Christian and Muslim, needs to be more courageous than it has been, said Abuom. She noted: "Without directly supporting attacks on the other religion, there have been some occasions when religious leaders have given a sort of silent approval to what their followers are saying and doing".

It is said starkly in the book of Genesis that murder and the shedding of human blood are prohibited because of the fact that human beings are created in the image of God, Tveit said. "Placing of these words in the early chapters of our Holy Scriptures is an essential heart of our belief that religion should never be used to justify violence", he said. There have been many times when adherents of both our faiths have tried to use religious motives to justify violent actions. "But if religious people can be honest with each other about the ways in which religion has been used to underpin violence - we can also find the ways together for religion to be part of the solution", he said.

Representatives from the WCC and Al-Azhar University, including Grand Imam Prof. Dr Ahmad al-Tayyeb, have been working cooperatively since 2015, when ECHOS, a commission on youth engagement in the ecumenical movement, met in Cairo, Egypt from 8-13 May. Opening his presentation to the meeting in Geneva last week, Al-Tayyeb said that today's world seems to be ruled by selfishness, hatred and conflict. It is a matter of great sadness to see that religions are considered responsible for this dreaded terrorism, noted Al-Tayyeb, who is also chairman of the Muslim Council of Elders.

"Perhaps the authors of these charges are not aware of two important facts in this regard: first, religion came to establish peace between people and lift the injustice of the oppressed as well as to emphasize the sanctity of human blood. Second, terrorism, which blames religions, mainly Islam, does not differentiate while promoting its acts. No

difference is made between religious and atheist, or between a Muslim and non-Muslim. At a quick glance at the victims of terrorism, it is confirmed that Muslims themselves are more than paying the price of this terrorism with their blood."

It is no longer sufficient by the clergy to issue condemnations and statements against acts of violence, terrorism and hate speech, said Al-Tayyeb. "That is like working on separate islands, which results in weak targets, with no concrete and influential impact on the ground. However, a joint action must be coordinated to confront the phenomenon of violence, scrutinizing the causes of the phenomenon and working on the proposed solutions to intellectually, scientifically, socially and educationally confront that phenomenon."

There must be a collaborative attempt to fix what has become a communal problem, said Bishop Angaelos, general bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the United Kingdom. "Developments over the last years are greater than any



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individual, church, religion or even state can fix alone," he said. "There must be a new form of dialogue that changes the narrative from helplessness and conflict to the one of hope and promise. This new dialogue can not have tolerance as its baseline. Acceptance is what we must be aiming for."

In the world today we cannot draw a clear division between East and West; there are numerous Christian minorities living in the East, and numerous Muslim minorities in the West. "As religious leaders, we must change the narrative that presents the Middle East as the place of conflict," said Angaelos. "The reality is that the Middle East is undeniably the place of religion and faith. Religion can not be seen as an enemy, but it must be seen as an ally both to the state and civil society. We can not continue to be seen as a problem, but we must rightly be recognized as a solution."

We are held accountable for the acts of religious extremists because we are all people of religion, noted Angaelos. "The strong secular lobby throughout the world now continues to look at us and tell us that religion is the problem. This is our battle - no one else's. Our silence will allow others to speak for us."

Definitions of extremism were explored at the meeting by the Prof. Quraish Shihab, former minister of religious affairs of Indonesia and member of the Muslim Council of Elders. "Incapacity to respect any other belief that is different from our own belief or belief of our community, as long as it is peaceful, or ignoring such beliefs is an indicator of isolation, radicalism and extremism", said Shihab.

Rev. Dr Martin Junge, general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, stated in the meeting that the role of religious leaders today is to prophetically stand up against messages, attitudes and actions that counter God's intentions of peace for the entire humanity. According to Junge, education is one of necessary action areas to make a difference. "We have a responsibility to educate the religious leaders in our communities toward awareness of extremism and how to be guarded against it. I am particularly keen that we have the courage to identify within our own sacred texts those passages and references which have been used to justify violence based on religious beliefs."

Interreligious dialogues too often emphasize the peace messages of their own traditions, without admitting that there are also those other texts that could be interpreted to condone or instigate violence, said Junge. "What will we do with those texts? What will we say to our preachers on how to relate to these texts? We can't fight religious extremism without giving tools to our leaders to relate and interpret these texts."

Prof. Dr Mahmoud Hamdi Zaqzouq introduced the meeting to the Islamic concept of peace, briefly summarizing it in three circles, one leading to another. First, the personal peace each of us wants to achieve for ourselves. Second, our peace with God, exemplified in our religious beliefs. Third, peace with others and the world around us. "God says in the Qur'an that He himself is the peace, and the Arabic term for Islam is derived from the word with a same meaning - peace," said Zaqzouq.

We may think that these existing conflicts of today hardly affect us because we live far away - but they do, said Metropolitan Prof. Dr Gennadios of Sassima, vice moderator of the WCC Central Committee. "However, in spite of these polarizing trends, God wants us to stand in the gap and be peacemakers. In fact, this situation grants us an opportunity to share the good news of peace, as it is written in Prophet Isaiah: How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings..." (Isaiah 52:7).

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[WCC welcomes Grand Imam of Al-Azhar](#) (WCC press release of 1 October 2016)

[Extremism, dialogue and peace are focus of Christian-Muslim joint communiqué](#) (WCC press release of 1 October 2016)

[Dialogue flourishes between WCC, Muslim Council of Elders](#) (WCC press release of 30 September 2016)



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