

# H.H. BARTHOLOMEW 1<sup>ST</sup>

Archbishop of Constantinople - New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch

## Thierry de Montbrial, Founder and Executive Chairman of Ifri and the WPC

Ladies and gentlemen, hello. Today, three of us will be speaking French and one Arabic. I would like to take this opportunity to remind you that the World Policy Conference uses two languages equally, English and French. So you can speak French whenever you like. We will be speaking French and Arabic.

What is the purpose of this session? It is the idea I had a few months ago that the World Policy Conference should be a place where everyone can meet. We come from five continents and all of us are driven by the idea of good governance, in other words, doing our part to ensure that the world as a whole makes the best possible progress. This is not a naïve vision of peace. We are perfectly aware of the tragedies going on in the world today, but we are trying to work towards finding the best possible solutions to problems and preventing conflicts from spiraling into war, as happens all too often. That is why we came up with the idea, here in Abu Dhabi, of spending some time with the three Abrahamic religions to get back to basics. What is the point of religions? Certainly not to make war. They must serve to elevate ourselves. They must serve a transcendental relationship that all men and women have within them. It must inspire us to give the best of ourselves.

That is what we propose as the theme of this morning's discussion with three eminent personalities. His Holiness the Patriarch of Constantinople has honored us with his presence since our 2012 meeting in Cannes 13 years ago. We have Judge Mohamed Abdelsalam, the Secretary General of the Council of Elders. Frankly, Your Excellency, you do not give us the impression that you have such a leading position among the older generation. You look too young. But after all, young and old can and should work together, and that is what we plan to do. We also have another young man with us, the Chief Rabbi of France, Haïm Korsia, whom you already know as he was with us last year.

These are the three figures brought together here. I would like to thank them very much. In a moment, we shall see whether the goal is achieved, which I have a feeling it will be. Your Holiness, please begin.

## His Holiness Bartholomew I<sup>st</sup>, Archbishop of Constantinople - New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch

Hello everyone. I am going to speak in French. Your Eminence, Your Excellency, distinguished participants, Thierry de Montbrial, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends.

The end of the Cold War created a great surge of hope around the world. The two decades that followed seemed to confirm those expectations. A wind of freedom swept across the globe. Cleared of obstacles, goods, capital, information and people began moving freely across the planet. This freedom, the result of the lowering of borders, was combined with amazing progress in transportation and, especially, the means of communication. Economic activity benefited from the general fluidity. Economic growth, a fall in poverty and a reduction in global inequalities have not only borne out our hopes, but gone far beyond what we could have imagined when the Wall fell.

We are 15 years on from the first major disappointment, the subprime crisis. Since then, there has been one crisis after another, from the environmental crisis to global warming, Covid, the invasion of Ukraine, the war between Hamas and Israel, the energy crisis, the migration crisis and the crisis of democracy.

The future looks increasingly bleak. If the economy and politics no longer inspire hope, can we turn to religion?

For individuals, families and communities, religion has always been a source of hope and comfort. However, our meeting is not about this aspect, fundamental to the mission of religious institutions as it may be. The issue posed is on a broader scale, the global future, and concerns the political and geopolitical influence of religion. In the new global context, a transition period between a world we are leaving behind and a new one that has yet to take shape, religion is a major challenge. It can inspire high hopes, but it can also be used as a weapon. The extreme diversity of religion, combined with the ambiguous distinction between what is religious and what is not, leads to amalgams and confusion that make any generalization complex. That said, we will try to put forward some ideas and avenues for reflection.

Religion is a factor in democratic renewal. Enormous technological progress since the 19<sup>th</sup> century has created a sense of arrogance that has led to the reckless exploitation of natural resources and disregard for the balance of natural systems. This hubris has extended to the field of human relations. Economic criteria based on the methods of the physical sciences have become predominant in the organization of human relationships every level, within states, between states and increasingly in the emergence of transnational networks. The same reductionism that has led to environmental and health crises also goes a long way towards explaining breakdowns in human relations. Decade after decade, spiritual and ethical values have regressed despite the lessons of the Second World War and the Holocaust.

The consequences of these developments are obvious. The crisis of institutions, the crisis of democracy, the rise in crime, xenophobia and the weakening of the sense of citizenship are the direct results of spiritual and ethical regression.

Religions and their institutions have resisted this trend. They have often been marginalized, partly due to their lack of adaptation. Yet today, their resilience is becoming an asset. In their teachings, rituals and organization of social ties, religions draw on wisdom accumulated over millennia. They contrast the depth and resilience of long-term temporality with the superficiality and fragility of the ephemeral. More and more people are turning to religion in search of spirituality and hope. In their traditions, religions have provided the sustenance to fill the emptiness that people feel in their souls. They can help to breathe new life into democratic societies.

Religion is a link between people. Globalization has unified the world in a superficial way. Today, there are strong trends towards fragmentation, a reorganization of space that goes beyond the economic dimension. The divides that are emerging or re-emerging are also political, geopolitical and identity-based. One of this trend's main aspects involves relations between the West and the rest of the world. Crises have hit poor countries much harder. Many of them accuse the developed nations of being selfish and lacking solidarity. Memories of the colonial era come flooding back. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, and now the horrific war between Hamas and Israel, have exposed a widening spiritual gap between the two blocs, despite the extreme diversity of what is called the global South.

Where do religions stand in the face of this challenge? The geographical distribution of religions is certainly complex. However, most faiths span continents and cross borders, so a spiritual structure is needed that can help mitigate the forces of dissociation and division. The unity advocated by religions is not limited solely to the economic dimension, such as globalization. It is based on ancient traditions rooted in the long term. Different religions have coexisted on the same land for centuries and various lands were the cradle of a common religion. In a world currently threatened by fragmentation, religions can offer a hope of unity. Their role as mediators could foster dialogue between two economically, politically and culturally distinct worlds.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in Istanbul, present across the world, is a notable example. Its presence and acceptance could prove particularly beneficial. Its long history of coexistence, dialogue and exchange, not only with Judaism but also with Islam, is a real asset for the Christian world.



Religion can play a role in environmental protection. While religious observance is declining in the West, it is holding steady in the rest of the world. Religious communities are expanding in parts of the world with high population growth, notably India and, even more so, Africa. That is why religious institutions have the potential to reach more people with their teachings than international organizations, think tanks or NGOs.

When it comes to protecting the environment, the number of people aware of the issue is crucial. Countless individual acts lead to the degradation of landscapes, damage to flora and fauna, pollution of the oceans and all the other forms of destruction caused by human activity. The ability to influence these acts can have a considerable impact. Mobilizing religious institutions to teach respect for the environment is therefore essential. The Ecumenical Patriarchate recognized this need very early on. We remain actively involved in interfaith dialogue to protect the environment.

Unfortunately, religion is used as a tool. The ideal of unifying humanity on the basis of economic rationality is far from reassuring. In fact, it has fostered resentment and anxiety about identity. After pursuing the ideal of freedom and prosperity for all, the quest for security and prestige now predominates. The fragmentation we are seeing is the result of this development. In this context, religion becomes a major political resource, as it can work to differentiate between populations. This was seen during the Ukrainian crisis, when it was often used to stoke political and geopolitical antagonism. There is often a tendency to view religion's geopolitical role through the lens of confrontations between people of different faiths. Samuel Huntington's famous thesis on the clash of civilizations, for example, envisaged the world split up into major religious blocs. But the reality is quite different. The use of religion as an identity marker and a tool of power fuels equally intense conflicts within the major religions themselves. The outcome is a complex landscape of tensions between and within religions.

The geopoliticization of religion confers enormous responsibilities on religious institutions. They cannot dismiss people's aspirations for independence and freedom. At the same time, it is vital to emphasize religion's calming and peace-promoting role. The rich experience of religious institutions is crucial. There is no denying that religion sometimes plays a role in fanning the flames of conflict and war. Unfortunately, religious fanaticism has led and continues to lead to heinous crimes, oppression and discrimination. But does the blame lie with religion as such, or those who warp it for political ends? If religion were wiped out, as certain ideologies had sought to do, would the causes of hatred, conflict and crime also have been eradicated?

Religion is a battlefield where the best co-exists with the worst. But what makes religion fundamentally positive is its historical roots. Centuries-old religious institutions have a legacy of wisdom that allow them to counter the gravest dangers. This perspective becomes clear when the devastation wrought by modern ideologies lacking such historical depth is considered. The role of religion in conflict is therefore a nuanced one. While religion is often exploited for ends that have nothing to do with its essence, the involvement of religious institutions in conflict situations can also temper their virulence.

Dear friends, in a world that is constantly changing, facing crises and exposed to short- and long-term threats that were unheard of a few decades ago, the role of religion is undoubtedly positive. It offers a ray of hope. However, the foregoing considerations show that this is a complex issue. In some circumstances, religion can be associated with negative behavior. As a result, a huge responsibility rests on the shoulders of religious institutions and their leaders. Without denying their doctrines and convictions, religious leaders have a duty to coordinate their efforts to magnify the beneficial effects of their ancestral traditions. That is why interfaith dialogue is primordial.

The growing role of religion can be a source of hope that must be strengthened by greater attention from the academic and research communities. We expect them to make original, innovative and positive contributions and to gain a better understanding of the geopolitics of religion with a view to taking action. As we pointed out last year, theologians and other specialists in religious matters must open up to other points of view and develop dialogue with other disciplines. It is also important for social scientists, political scientists and international relations specialists to overcome a certain reluctance to delve into religious issues. To understand the new world taking shape before our eyes, religion cannot be ignored.



Thank you for your attention, dear friends.

### **Thierry de Montbrial**

I would like to thank Your Holiness most warmly for your talk, which is both hopeful and realistic, especially for your call for think tanks, the people who reflect on geopolitical issues, to approach religions without forgetting what they fundamentally are, by not taking them simply as political institutions among others. I think we need to think about that.