

The «Charter of the new alliance of virtue» facing the Covid-19 emergency

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1.- The «Charter of the new alliance of virtue»

Scholars and religious leaders that signed «The charter of the new alliance of virtue» - in Abu Dhabi on December 2019 - share the statement that religious freedom belongs to the ontological status of the human being¹. The sponsor of the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim societies, and especially his leader H.E. Shaykh ‘Abdallah Bin Bayyah, Chairman of the United Arab Emirates Fatwa Council and President of the Forum, suggest that Abrahamic religions can support a new wide view on religious relations offering a helpful way to overcome the barricades of intolerance. According to this statement, the Abrahamic family can live together having common and distinct theological and ethical traditions, each of which values human virtues, and each of which requires peace and mutual respect and tolerance in order to flourish. This is an important affirmation to confirm the necessity of religious cooperation to overcome differences and to aim towards tolerance and respect as mankind goals.

The Charter includes the important affirmation, that is: «another is rights that exist prior to the state and inhere in each human being by virtue of his or

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¹ The document is available on the website [here](#).

RELIGION, LAW AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

her existence. Such rights are typically understood as deriving from a greater-than-human source, such as God or nature, for the believer or non-believer. These rights must be acknowledged and protected by any just state. They should be understood as necessary to human dignity, as well as social flourishing. It is also mean that religious freedom occurs to the human race like a fundamental right». This is directly linked to human dignity, and in this perspective, it states that «All people, irrespective of their diverse races, religions, languages, and ethnicities, by virtue of the divine soul breathed into them, are endowed with dignity by their Omnipotent Creator».

2.- The new borders of religious freedom, tolerance and respect.

All societies must preserve freedom of conscience and religion or belief. It is the responsibility of the State to protect religious freedom, including diversity of religions, which guarantees justice and equality among all members of society². It is important to support the idea that there is no compulsion in religion.

Tolerance is the central theme of the Abu Dhabi Chart. The beliefs of others must be legally protected and culturally respected; differences should be seen as a source of enrichment, not as a conflict. These are the new borders to be torn down in terms of religious freedom.

The believers have the right to exercise their worship individually and collectively, and they have also the right to participate in the rites of their religion, and to manifest their faith. This freedom is guaranteed by the constitutions in many countries around the world, and by the most important international charters of rights (e.g. art. 9 of the ECHR). The coronavirus pandemic that has hit humanity, has led to huge compressions of the rights of

² Fuccillo A., 2018, *Legal-economic Koinè and the Religious Nomopoiesis*, in «Calumet - Intercultural law and humanities review», On-line Review (www.calumet-review.it), 1-20.

RELIGION, LAW AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

the faithful all over the world. These limits to religious freedom have a deep impact to all mankind lifestyle.

People cannot participate in collective rites and attend to worship activities, because they are potential vehicles of contagion. At the same time, many limitations have been placed on access to religious buildings, and place of worship, sometimes substituted by ceremonies carried out on the web.

The new Alliance of virtue has been inspired by the Marrakesh Declaration, a document signed by many scholars, personalities, intellectuals and religious leaders from all over the world³. The Marrakesh Declaration is not simply a formal statement of principles, since it aims to give practical advice on actions to achieve social cohesion using a bottom-up model, which implies an expanded concept of citizenship and no law enforcement by the State, as the “state religion”⁴. The teachings of the religions and their rules of behaviour are decisive for this path. The method outlined by the Marrakech declaration proves valid, and on these principles the teachings of the New Alliance of Virtues are more concretely applicable and ready to overcome new challenge.

3.- Faith deprivations in Covid-19 emergency. A new challenge for religious authorities.

The impact of deprivation is very serious for the faithful of the religions. For Christians the deprivation of religious activities was then particularly suffered given the concomitance with the “holy week” and the Easter rites. All Catholics in the world will remember upset the images of the Pope in their hearts in an empty Piazza San Pietro delivering the Urbi et orbi blessing on March 27th, Palm Sunday, the *Via Crucis*, the Mass of the resurrection. For Muslims all over the world the pandemic limitations fall during the holy month

³ The document is available on the website <http://www.marrakeshdeclaration.org/>.

⁴ Fuccillo A. (Ed.), 2016, *The Marrakech Declaration. A Bridge to Religious Freedom in Muslim Countries?*, Napoli: Editoriale Scientifica.

RELIGION, LAW AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

of Ramadan. They also had to suffer many limitations in regard to the Friday's prayer.

Religious authorities demonstrated an uncommon sensitivity in specifying alternative ritual paths to the faithful, accepting the limitations imposed by governments, well aware of the risks of spreading Covid-19. The principle of State-religions cooperation in defence of the health of citizens-faithful has been filled with new values. In that way, the Fatwa council of UAE clarifies that Al Fitr prayers should also be performed at home if mosques remain closed⁵.

The religious authorities' behaviour is even more appreciable, as the ordinances of the national and regional governments limited people's religious freedom, that is one of the primary rights to be protected. These restrictions also invaded matters within the competence of the ecclesiastical authorities.

In this field is really important to verify the correct balance of the constitutional values. Restrictions on stakeholder's religious freedom are perhaps possible. In these prospective a light compression of liberty of worship is almost possible especially in relation to people's right to health and in defence of public safety. All of these prohibitions are allowed only if it is contained within a well-defined and certainly not excessively long space-time limit, and in strict compliance with the hierarchy of sources of law.

By the way, it is clear that effective cooperation of States with religious authorities is the best way to achieve this important result.

⁵ UAE's fatwa on fasting and prayers in Ramadan 1441, 19 April 2020, which rules that « the Taraweeh prayers will not be allowed in mosques during Ramadan. They could be performed individually at home, or the male family member who has the most responsibility for taking care of and making decisions about the household may lead the prayer for his family by either reciting the Quranic verses or reading from the Quran. The council warns against congregating to perform prayers, as this could endanger lives. It stresses that performing Friday prayer is not permissible during the suspension of mosque services. Instead, Muslims should perform their Dhuhr (noon) regular prayer at their homes; if the pandemic continues until the time of Eid Al Fitr, people may perform Eid Al Fitr prayer individually at their homes or in a group with their respective family members without a sermon».

RELIGION, LAW AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

The global pandemic indeed requires an effort from society as a whole in order to prevent the transmission of the virus.

Despite the assumption of secularism of the public sphere, the relationship between religion and law is still present in the daily practice of interpreters of principal law systems. Religious rules apply sometimes directly through the activity of religious courts, sometimes indirectly through a religiously oriented application of legal rules⁶.

In this context, religions acted in a double way. From one side, in order to protect the individual and public health, religious denominations encouraged the faithful to practice autonomously and issued a worldwide suspension of all rites, observances and pilgrimages⁷. At the same time, religious leaders have turned to online platforms and apps to ensure religious services to their communities⁸. The pandemic also strengthened inter-religious dialogue as demonstrated by joint statements of religious leaders and interfaith moments of prayer⁹.

It is then more than clear that the sensitivity of religions is what has made this really possible; especially in regard to the preservation of the rights of the faithful from undue invasions caused by political power.

The sufferings of the faithful for the deprivations of their right to access worship activities, was felt by many important religious leaders. The problem is most evident as many laws prevent the use of places of worship and prayer, but maybe the faithful might still be able to access them in compliance with the

⁶ Fuccillo A., Sorvillo F., Decimo L., 2017, *The courts and the code. legal osmosis between religion and law in the cultural framework of civil law systems*, in «Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale», On-line Review (www.statoechiese.it), n. 28.

⁷ I.e. Holy Week rituals organised by the Catholic Church in the Vatican City were closed to public for the first time in history - <https://bit.ly/3bpNZ0l> -; Saudi Arabia suspended the entry of pilgrims for the Umrah - <https://bit.ly/3aw1GcR> -)

⁸ I. e. the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama`at Canada launched a virtual Ramadan campaign - <https://bit.ly/3bv7Ivr> -).

⁹ I.e. religious leaders from around the world held a virtual interfaith moment “for hope and solidarity,” organized by the NGO ‘Religions for Peace’ - <https://bit.ly/3eEA7S5> -To learn more: <https://bit.ly/2VODq0f>.

RELIGION, LAW AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

security protocols. There is also a difficulty to get their holy place also due to the limits of the permitted travel.

4.- The Statement of Solidarity of the New Alliance of Virtue.

Religions are withstanding the exceptional difficulty of the moment and, at the same time, inviting the faithful to demonstrate their faith through concrete acts of solidarity, as promoted by the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, which produced the important document called “a Statement of Solidarity of the New Alliance of Virtue”¹⁰ shared by eminent personalities belonging to various religious denominations. It contains essential references to the unity of mankind, the solidarity and harmony of the “Abrahamic” religions in the defence of each “soul”.

It states that «In this extraordinary moment, we invite believers to reflect on a number of points: First, in the face of the blows of fate, we must contemplate human fragility and seek strength and mercy from God with the hope that God may grant us success and guidance in our efforts to overcome adversity and crisis». It also contains an important admonition to all mankind: «this virus, which does not recognise territorial boundaries or distinctions between races, or between the rich and the poor, is an opportunity for us to remind ourselves of human equality and to take to heart and remember the teaching of our Abrahamic religions that every soul—whoever that soul may be—represents all of humanity. Our religions oblige us to seek the safety, well-being, and protection of every soul from all forms of harm, whether they be epidemics, pandemics, oppression, or wars».

This document also includes the important results recently achieved on the front of inter-religious dialogue.

¹⁰ The document is available on the website [here](#).

RELIGION, LAW AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

Faced with the pandemic emergency, the Churches responded with a great sense of responsibility in the core moment of their tradition. The recommendation to the faithful is placed in this perspective to follow up their rituals «as we are in the midst of Easter and Passover and approaching the holy month of Ramadan, we recommend following the instructions and guidance which best ensures the preservation of lives and the maintenance of the public good». The success of the fight against the disease it is up on them and their conduct.

It is necessary to use the prudence of the jurist however, to prevent that a “suspended faith” from being transformed into “forbidden faith”.

The religious freedom of individuals and groups can shape and adapt in the balance with other fundamental human rights, but it can never completely move back or worse disappear.