

ADDRESS OF HIS BEATITUDE THE PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM AT THE SECOND INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE IN ATHENS

Remarks at the 2nd Athens International Conference on Religious
and Cultural Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence in the Middle
East

His Beatitude Theophilos III
Patriarch of Jerusalem

30 October 2017

Your All-Holiness,

Your Excellency, Mr Kotzias,

Your Eminences,

Respected Members of the Government and the Diplomatic
Service,

Fellow Participants in this conference,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are honoured to be present at this important conference,
and we bring you greetings from the Holy Land and from the
many peoples who make up the rich tapestry of our common life
in the Middle East.

The subject before us is a complex one, and within the scope
of this conference we would like to focus on the subject of
peaceful coexistence. For millennia the Middle East has been
thoroughly pluralistic, both religiously and culturally. Of

this there is no doubt, and the historical evidence is clear. The principal question before us, therefore, is not whether the Middle East is a pluralistic society. The principal question before us is precisely how we shall live with the reality of this pluralism in a way that respects the dignity of every human being and ensures the well-being of the different communities that make up our society. Our pluralism is a great gift, and it is urgent that we come to a place where we honour this pluralism, and no longer regard it as a problem.

The Middle East is a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious mosaic. But the design of this – or any – mosaic is not random. Mosaics are delicate, often intricate compositions, with each tiny piece contributing to a magnificent, and much larger, picture.

The synthesis that makes up the mosaic of the Middle East is the synthesis of overlapping and inter-related histories, cultures, and religions. This synthesis has created the milieu for our co-existence for generations, and we have learnt that where there is peaceful coexistence, this is so because true co-existence is dynamic, and not static. This dynamic, this energy, of true co-existence occurs when there is a genuine mutual respect and honour of the one for the other, and where there is a deep appreciation of our common humanity and our common destiny. Where this dynamic exists, there are strong, enduring human communities where the rights and uniqueness of all are allowed to flourish.

We have known this dynamic of co-existence in the Middle East. Yet in our day, instead of building on a long history of this way of living, there are powerful forces at work in our region to destroy this fundamental basis of our life, and to bring any concept of co-existence and pluralism into disrepute. We are the witnesses of this undermining and destruction, for it is happening in our region even as we meet here in Athens, and it is a very serious matter indeed.

Jerusalem has been, and remains, the great symbol and embodiment of this co-existence. This is the beauty of Jerusalem, and the evidence of her nobility. This is also her divine vocation. And yet instead of supporting Jerusalem in this light, instead of enabling Jerusalem to be revealed as the Holy City that it genuinely is, there are those who are determined to undermine her. We forget that we do not possess Jerusalem; Jerusalem possesses us.

In order to illustrate our point, let us imagine for a moment Jerusalem without this religious and cultural pluralism. There would, in fact, be little or nothing there. Without the richness of our several human communities and our histories; without the evidence all round of the divine-human encounter in the sites that are holy to Jews, Christians, and Muslims; without the variety of daily experience of worship in every quarter, there would be no Jerusalem as we have come to know the Holy City. We are witnesses to the fact that Jerusalem is big enough for all who call her their spiritual home.

On the one hand we know all this to be true. On the other hand we seem unable to live and work except in ways that militate against this truth. This is more than a tragedy; it is an offense against both humanity and God.

So what are we to do now?

Discussions about the life of the Middle East are endless. The pressing question before us today is this: when shall we commit ourselves to a new kind of action, to a new way of doing business? When shall we give ourselves to the genuine and life-giving dynamic that is the real basis for our peaceful co-existence? We must face our fears, our hurts, our prejudices, and deal with them, openly and honestly, and most of all with a real commitment to the re-establishment of that societal synthesis that is the great strength of co-existence.

These actions are the beginning of the restoration of the true

multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious mosaic that is Jerusalem, the Holy Land, and the Middle East. We know what we must do, but have we the courage? And are we able to insist that it is time to cease speaking about the complexity of the Middle East in the negative? We would be much better speaking the truth that the Middle East is the birthplace for human civilisation of all that it means to value other cultures and religious expressions.

There is no more data that we need to know in order to be able to act. Let us not allow a desire for more information cripple us from action that we can take now to re-establish peace and mutual respect.

As we meet in this conference, therefore, let us be resolved not just to our important discussion, but also to a new commitment to a right understanding of the history and integrity of the nature of our multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious Middle East. And let us be further resolved to support this and allow this fundamental quality of our society to flourish for the well-being of all.

Thank you.