

Is Religion the Problem or the Solution - especially in in the Middle East
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The criticism of religion that it bears primary responsibility for most historic conflicts, fails to acknowledge that until very recently in the western world , and still in many parts, religion has enveloped the totality of human existence and thus all human activity for better and worse had been dressed in religious garb, as it were. A secular world view in which religion can be separated and even rejected from the rest of life, is a very new phenomenon in terms of human history. However apologists for the new secular age would do well to exercise a little more modesty as the greatest atrocities of modern history – led by the likes of Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, have all reflected a secular world view.

Moreover most modern conflicts that are portrayed as religious ones are not such in origin. Whether between Hindus and Muslims in Kashmir; Buddhists and Hindus in Sri Lanka; Christians and Muslims in Nigeria or Indonesia; Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland; or between Muslims and Jews in the Middle East; these conflicts are not at all religious or theological in origin! They are all territorial conflicts in which ethnic and religious differences are exploited and manipulated, often mercilessly.

The late Pope John Paul II declared that violence in the name of religion is not religion. Dean Inge of England when challenged to acknowledge that Christianity had failed answered that Christianity had not been tested – in other words, those who acted violently did not reflect authentic religion.

Probably we here would agree with them. However the fact is that there are many who do not and who believe that violence in the name of religion is precisely what religion demands.

The sages of the Talmudic period showed an amazing willingness for self-critique when they declared that Torah – used here to mean the Jewish religion as a whole – can be *sam hachayim*, the elixir of life, or *sam hamavet*, the potion of death. It depends how you use it

So this begs the question, why and how is it that religion is so easily exploited and abused? Why is it that in many contexts of conflict in our world, religion appears to be more part of the problem than the solution?

In the eleventh century scholar Yehudah Halevi's apologia for Judaism which consists of a dialogue between a Jewish scholar and the King of Khazars, there is an occasion when the scholar has no adequate reply and thus Halevi provides a reflective critique. In response to the argument of the scholar against Christianity and Islam that though they preach love and justice, in practice they perpetrate violence and oppression, and that Jews don't do that sort of thing; the King replies that of course the Jews do not do so - they don't have the power to do so, the others do ! In this riposte, Halevi offers an important insight that the marriage of religion to power more often than not leads to the abuse of the former.

Yet, much violence in the name of religion derives from the powerless precisely reflecting the alienation of the marginalized.

Indeed I believe that much of the answer to our question is to be found in something implicit in an earlier comment of mine – namely the socio-cultural territorial and political contexts in which religion functions.

Because religion seeks to give meaning and purpose to who we are, it is inextricably bound up with all the different components of human identity, from the most basic such as family, through the larger components of communities, ethnic groups, nations and peoples, to the widest components of humanity and creation as a whole. These components of human identity are the building blocks of our psycho- spiritual well being and we deny them at our peril. Scholars studying the modern human condition have pointed out just how much the counterculture, drug abuse, violence, cults etc. are a search for identity on the part of those who have lost the traditional compasses of orientation.

In the relationship between religion and identity, the components or circles within circles of our identity affirm who we are; but by definition at the same time they affirm who we are not! Whether the perception of distinction and difference is viewed positively or negatively, depends upon the context in which we find or perceive ourselves.

You may recall the work of the popular writer on animal and human behavior, Robert Ardrey, who referred to three basic human needs: security, stimulation and identity. Ardrey pointed out that the absence of security serves as automatic stimulation that leads to identity. When people sense a threat, such as in wartime, they do not face the challenge of loss of identity. On the contrary; the very absence of security itself guarantees the stimulation that leads to strengthening of identity. Indeed because religion is so inextricably bound up with identity, religion itself acquires far greater prominence in times of threat and conflict, nurturing and strengthening the identity that senses itself as threatened, in opposition to that which is perceived as threatening it. We might note in this regard the role of the ancient Hebrew prophets in relation to the people when in exile. Then they do not challenge their lack of moral responsiveness and ethical outreach – that they do when the people are secure. In times of insecurity, they see their role to protect and enhance the identity that is under threat.

However the character that religion assumes under such circumstances is often not just one of nurturing, but often one of such self-preoccupation and paradoxically even one of self-righteousness, that disregards “the other” who is perceived as not part of one’s identity group and even demonizes that “other” who is perceived as hostile, often portraying the latter – in the words of the historian Richard Hafstadter – as “a perfect picture of malice”.

The image I find useful in explaining the behaviour of particular identities for good or bad is that of a spiral. These different components of identity as I mentioned before, are circles within circles. When they feel secure within the wider context in which they find themselves, then they can open up and affirm the broader context; families respecting other families; communities respecting other communities;

nations respecting other nations; and religions affirming the commonality within the family of nations or humankind. However, when these components of human identity do not feel comfortable in the broader context, they isolate themselves, cut themselves off from one another and generally compound the sense of alienation.

In the Middle East this phenomenon is especially intense. Everybody in our part of the world feels vulnerable and threatened; it is just that different groups see themselves and others in different paradigms! Therefore it is very difficult within such a context to be able to open to the other and affirm our common humanity in the recognition and the importance of the fact not only that every human being is created in the image of the Divine; but that our religions – all our religions – affirm the value of peace as an ideal for human society and see violence and war as being undesirable – perhaps a necessity in cases, but certainly not as an ideal.

Moreover where religion does not provide a prophetic challenge to political authority, but is both caught up as part of the political reality and even subordinate and subject to political authority as it is in the Middle East; institutional religion tends to be more part of the problem than part of the solution. The role of the prophetic challenge to religious identities, to be faithful to their traditions while affirming the dignity of the other and promoting reconciliation and peace – has tended in our part of the world as in most contexts of conflict, to be the voice of the non-establishment religious visionaries and activists.

Christianity has perhaps been a more constructive voice within this context, but there is the rub; for Christianity in the Middle East is characterized precisely by the fact that it is not linked to any political power base. However most institutional religion in our part of the world is so inextricably bound up with the power structures – with the heads of the respective Jewish and Muslim communities actually appointed by the political authorities – that it is very rare for a truly prophetic voice to emerge from the institutional religious leadership of either the Jewish or Muslim communities. And even within the local Christian communities there is also a tendency to be hamstrung by the exigencies of the political realities that impose very significant restrictions and pressures upon the role of leadership within such a context. However this does not make religion irrelevant to the conflict and thus to attempts to resolve it – on the contrary. These institutions are still the symbolic representative bodies of the identities involved - for worse and potentially for better.

However because religion is associated more with partisan insularity if not downright hostility towards the “other”, there has been an understandable tendency on the part of peace initiatives in the Middle East to avoid religious institutions and their authorities, seeing them as obstacles to any such peace process. This tendency is comprehensible but terribly misguided, as it fails to address the most deep-seated dimensions of the communal identities involved and actually undermines the capacities of positive political initiatives to succeed. Indeed I believe this was a significant factor in the failure of the Oslo Process. Let me make the point more graphically. On the lawn of the White House when the famous handshake took place in September 1992, one saw no visible personality representing religious leadership either of the Jewish community or of the Muslim community in the Holy Land supporting the desire to find a way out of the regional conflict. The message was clear: religion is something to be kept out of the process.

It is not an exaggeration to say that this attitude compounded a sense of alienation on the part of the most fervently religious elements within both communities who did their best to violently undermine that process. Indeed the process of trying to keep religion out of the equation just invites the most extremist elements to dominate the religious discourse. Like all aspect of nature that abhors a vacuum, if the moderate voices are ignored , then the extremist ones will be the ones to be heard. Of course we have to protect ourselves against the violent abuse of religion. However it is not enough to be defensive, one has to be proactive; and if one does not want the extremist discourse to predominate, one has to empower the moderates who in fact are the real majority anyway.

Furthermore, during the last decade, not only have we witnessed terrible violence in the Holy Land, but we also have seen a most worrying religious manipulation of a territorial conflict, using religious symbols and arguments to poison minds and justify terrible carnage. Indeed the second intifada was called the Al Aqsa intifada – the battle for Muslim Jerusalem. And I discover as I travel in the Muslim world that Muslims overwhelmingly believe that this conflict in the Holy land is an assault against Islam whose holy sites are in peril threatened by Israeli malevolent intent. When I tell them that in fact Orthodox Jewish law prohibits Jews from going on to the Temple mount/ Haram e-sharif, that this is the position of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, and that as a result Judaism actually protects the Muslim presence on the mount ,they think I am trying to deceive them. And on the Jewish side we feel confronted by an overwhelmingly hostile denial in the Muslim world, of the religious connection between the Jewish People and Jerusalem and the Holy Land; and that this Jewish affirmation is portrayed as nothing more than a devious invention designed to dispossess the Palestinians.

These developments are very serious. For if this conflict is seen as what it is in essence – a territorial conflict; then it can be resolved through territorial compromise. But if it is seen as a religious conflict, between the godly and the godless, between good and evil; then we are condemned to unending bloodshed.

It was in this light, that amidst the worst violence of the second intifada in 2002 religious leaders of the Three Faith communities in the Holy Land were brought together for the first time ever in human history in Alexandria, Egypt,, to lend the voices of their respective Traditions to a call for an end to violence and to promoting peace and reconciliation. The then Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs Shimon Peres and his deputy Rabbi Michael Melchior played a critical role, but precisely because of the fear and insecurity that separates our communities in conflict, it required a third party to make initiate this meeting. The person to do so was the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord George Carey, energetically supported by Canon Andrew White. Providentially, Canterbury had an institutional relationship with Al Azhar in Cairo, the fountainhead of Islamic learning in the Arab world, indeed in the Muslim world at large, and the grand Imam of Al Azhar Sheikh Tantawi agreed to host the meeting. This was crucial in facilitating the success of this initiative.

For while the Chief Rabbis of Israel do not represent all religious Jews in Israel, let alone in the world; nevertheless most Jews would not object to them representing Judaism for the purpose of advancing interreligious reconciliation. Similarly, while the Patriarchs of Jerusalem do not represent the whole of Christendom, their role as representatives of Christianity in an effort to promote reconciliation in the Middle East would certainly be affirmed by the Christian world at large. But in the Islamic context, the religious leadership within Palestinian society does not have the standing throughout the Muslim world to ensure that its voice would be heard and respected as representing Islam. Thus the need to have this major institution of Islamic learning support this process was of critical importance. In addition Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak gave the green light to Sheikh Tantawi to host the gathering, and arranged for all the participants to subsequently meet with him at his palace in Cairo for a press conference. This was because President Mubarak like other political leaders, now had an interest especially after September 11 2001, in being seen to be on the side of constructive religious resolution of conflict rather than to be avoiding it. And not only President Mubarak, but of course Prime Minister Sharon, and Chairman Arafat also had an interest in such. The amazing thing was that they all lent their support to this initiative despite the violence that was going on at the time.

As mentioned this summit was indeed an historic event, as never before had heads of the different three faith communities in the Holy Land ever come together in one place. The participants included four leading Sheikhs from the establishment structure of the Palestinian authority including the head of the Shaaria Courts, their Supreme Islamic Juridical Authority; five prominent Israeli rabbis, including the Sephardic Chief Rabbi; and all Patriarchs were represented, the Latin Patriarch attending in person. After much discussion we were able to agree on a text of a declaration which condemned the violent abuse of religion; suicidal homicides; and all actions that are oppressive and destructive of human life and dignity. The declaration also called on political leaders to eschew violence and return to the negotiating table and to recognize the importance of religion as a force of reconciliation; and it called for respect for the rights of both Israeli and Palestinian peoples.

While this meeting and declaration did not bring an end to the violence, it did initiate a process of real communication between the religious leaders who had previously had no ongoing contact between them.

However something that made the Alexandria summit possible was also its weakness – namely, that the participants were there *ad personam*. This meant that their institutions did not have ownership of any process. When key figures left office or passed away, the continuity was lost. Accordingly we had to work to eventually set up a Council of the Religious Institutions of the Holy Land and a few years later we succeeded in bringing together the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, the Palestinian Ministry of Religious Affairs and its shaaria courts, and the Patriarchs and Bishops of the recognized Churches of the Holy Land.

This Council has three declared objectives, the first of which is to facilitate ongoing communication between the religious leadership. The second goal is to combat incitement , defamation and misrepresentation. Currently through a generous grant from the US State Department, the Council has given its auspices to the first non-partisan comprehensive study of both Palestinian and Israeli textbooks, to look at how we present or misrepresent images of the other, and specifically regarding religion, so that we may facilitate an educational increase of understanding and tolerance, overcome ignorance and reduce prejudice.

But last and not least, the members of the Council have declared the latter's purpose as seeking to support initiatives to bring an end to the conflict so that two peoples and three religions may live in peace and dignity.

Now this is counterintuitive to the Israeli and Palestinian street, let alone in the world at large which views religion as part of the problem if not it's source. However the fact is that all these religious leaders want to support and to be seen to be agents of peace, even if they have very different conceptions of the "end game" and how to get there.

However the importance of engaging them in such initiatives cannot be overstated. I am not suggesting , God forbid, that religious figures replace the politicians. In our part of the world, I think that that would be disastrous. However I am suggesting that it will be impossible to bring about a genuine resolution to the conflict

Simply stated – if we do not want Religion to be part of the problem, it has to be part of the solution – and where else more so than in the land that is holy and so significant for all three faiths, and where any accord between the local communities will have enormous ramifications not only for our region but indeed for the world as a whole.