Humankind – Between Fear and Hope

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"Happy is he who is always afraid"

This quote from Proverbs 28 v.14 makes it clear that fear is by no means necessarily a bad thing. Rather, it requires us to clarify what kind of fear is positive, and what kind is negative.

In a positive sense, fear is a God-given characteristic in creatures that serves as a necessary mechanism for self-preservation. If we did not have the capacity to fear, we would not avoid danger. It is in this sense of avoiding moral danger and appreciating the seriousness of its consequences that the Bible speaks in the verse quoted above.

Insights into the role that fear may play are well documented in the field of human social sciences. Many will recall the groundbreaking zoological studies of the sixties and their inference for the human condition. A number of popular works were produced as a result, among them Robert Ardrey's *Territorial Imperative*. Ardrey proposed the thesis that there are three basic interrelated needs in the human person – security, stimulation and the highest of these, identity. He claimed that the absence of security, i.e. a degree of fear and insecurity, was a necessary stimulation that promoted a sense of identity – the higher human social need. For example, in times of threat to one's society, i.e. war, there is an automatic stimulation of a sense of solidarity with the group of which one is part and which needs to defend accordingly.

Where there is no lack of security, Ardrey suggested, one finds an absence of stimulation and loss of identity. In these terms he defined the malaise of secure (and I would add, secular) Western society, plagued by adolescent as well as adult violence and sex abuse and often hijacked by a drug culture. All represented, he claimed, the search for stimulation on the part of the secure and bored.

But what might serve as positive stimulus for constructive identification can also often serve as the stimulus for a destructive use of identity and it is in this context that we see some of the most serious abuse of religion.

Indeed one of the most distressing realities that confronts the peace-loving person of faith is the fact that religion itself has so often and continues to be so easily abused to exacerbate destructive fear and hostility.

The late Pope John Paul II said that “violence in the name of religion is not religion.” However the fact is that our western religions do categorically justify violence, but they do so when it is in legitimate self-defense; there’s the rub, for the definition of when and what is legitimate self-defense varies according to subjective condition and interpretation. Nevertheless we may reinterpret Pope John Paul II’s words to mean that violence in the name of religion, when it is not in legitimate self-defense, is a desecration of religion itself. This was indeed the central statement of the historic Alexandria declaration issued a few years ago by the heads of the

three main religions of the Holy Land. Yet even with this qualification, it appears that many are oblivious to this viewpoint and we cannot deny that there is a great deal of violence initiated and perpetrated against others precisely in the name of religion in our world today, to the great embarrassment of so many of us!

The most famous and widely used argument in the defense of religion is of the ilk of that of Dean Inge, who, when challenged to acknowledge Christianity's failure in having been the cause of so much bloodshed in the course of human history, declared "Christianity did not fail! Christianity was not tested!" In other words what Dean Inge's and John Paul II's words indicate is that religion is not the source of violence, but that evil people manipulate and abuse religion for ulterior violent purposes.

Defenders of religion however cannot ignore the violence that was perpetrated in the course of human history precisely in the name of absolutist and exclusionist theological claims. Nevertheless we should be wary of blaming all the sins of religion on absolutist and exclusivist claims. There are those like the Amish and many among the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community, who pose no violent threat whatsoever, but to the contrary, wish to be left alone by the world outside.

Nevertheless it is certainly true that most conflicts that are portrayed as religious conflicts are not in essence anything of the sort. 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 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.

However this fact still begs the question. Why and how is it that religion is so easily exploited and abused to the extent that it becomes a tool of violence or at least an active handmaiden of it?

The abovementioned socio-cultural and political context in which religion functions does explain much of this phenomenon and as already indicated earlier in passing, the answer has to do substantially with the relationship between religion and what Ardrey describes as the higher human need of identity.

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.

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.

Indeed because religion is so inextricably bound up with identity, religion itself often 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. Indeed such is the role of the ancient Hebrew prophets in relation to the people when in exile. In such a context they do not challenge the people's lack of moral responsiveness and ethical outreach – that they do when the people are secure. In times of fear and insecurity, their role is to defend and enhance the identity that is under threat.

However while fear and threat may stimulate identity, what happens all too often is that they easily lead to an insularity and isolationism that is unhealthy for the individual, the group and for society at large. Historian Richard Hafstadter has pointed out how in times of conflict people have the need to portray their opposition, their enemy, as a "perfect image of malice." In situations of fear and conflict, religion itself – as a vehicle of comfort, nurture and solidarity – all too often becomes extremely insular even to the point of total alienation from and demonization of the other. (Of course, the representatives and apologists of the respective communities and religions do not see it in that way. In accordance with the abovementioned, they will portray their behavior as simply legitimate self-defense!)

The image of a spiral may prove useful here. The small circles of our identity can and should open up into the wider circles, enriching human society as they do so. However if these smaller components of identity feel insecure within the wider context; instead of spiraling out, they cut themselves off and isolate themselves from the wider circles from which they are alienated. There can be different reasons for such alienation – economic, political, and above all psychological; but "chauvinism" and what we popularly (though incorrectly) call "fundamentalism" are reflections of such alienation.

Accordingly fear can all too easily lead to very negative manifestations. At best this negativity is reflected in loss of hope, in skepticism and cynicism; at worst it is manifested in the horrendous violence that we continually witness in conflict and terror.

So while acknowledging the validity of Ardrey's argument, it is essential to recognize that fear can easily incapacitate and debilitate, and that security is an essential need in order to facilitate positive engagement with the other. Accordingly we may say that like many medications, taken in a very limited dose fear may have a salutory and even therapeutic value, but the moment that dose is exceeded it becomes poisonous and destructive.

Because religion and identity are so inextricably linked, in situations of conflict we tend to find that religious leaders also all too often become part of the problem more than the solution – focused on their own communities in insularity and isolation. Nevertheless because religion addresses not only the smallest components of identity, but also the widest, it is precisely religion that has such special capacity to counteract abuse that comes from insularity and xenophobia, through emphasizing and promoting the awareness of the wider circles of our common humanity and concomitant universal moral responsibility. However as I

have mentioned, to do so requires a sense of security on the part of those smaller components of identity in relation to their wider circles of encounter.

To negotiate these straits between Scylla and Charybdis – on the one hand the danger of loss of identity in a secure world, and on the other the development of strong but insular and even violent identities in an insecure context, it is necessary to promote strong religiously rooted identities, precisely within and in relation to a secure context in which they can function with a sense that they are part and parcel of the wider society.

It is the sense of being one's specific self and yet at the same time part and parcel of a wider whole that facilitates the maintenance of constructive secure identities – the prophetic balance between the particular and the universal – that can offer real hope to contemporary society. Contemporary society – multicultural, multi-ethnic and even multi-religious – has to find the fundamental shared values that can enable it to function as a collective society at the same time. Critical in this regard is the first and most fundamental teaching in our Biblical tradition about the human being, namely that each and every human being is created in the Divine Image.

There is a famous text in ancient Rabbinic literature of a debate between Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azai over what is the most important principle in the Bible. Akiva says it is the principle that one should love one's neighbor as oneself (Leviticus 19 v.18). But Ben Azai declared that the principle that every person is created in the Divine Image (Gen. 5 v.1) is more important "lest you say because I was cursed so let my fellow be cursed: because I was despised, so let my fellow be despised." In other words Ben Azai is concerned that loving someone "as yourself" can allow one to make subjective experience the basis for one's behavior towards another. However if we are able to see the Divine Image in every person, then regardless of our past experiences we will treat that person with dignity. Rabbi Tanhuma concludes this discussion in the Rabbinic text by saying that if one curses or despises any human being, it is as if you have cursed or despised God Himself, because the human person is made in His Image.

Perhaps the key to enabling people to feel their own sense of particular dignity while being part of the wider society is embodied in the person whom Jews, Christians and Muslims all see as their forefather: Abraham. In our traditions, Abraham personifies the concept of hospitality. Ancient Jewish tradition describes Abraham's tent as having all four side flaps rolled up during the day so that Abraham could be on the lookout for wayfarers and none would pass by without receiving his hospitality. Indeed Genesis 18 v.1 describes Abraham as "sitting at the entry to his tent in the heat of the day" when "he lifts up his eyes and sees and behold three men are standing before him." A Hassidic master raised the question why these angels are referred to as just "men," especially when the next chapter of Genesis begins with the words "and the two angels came to Sedom … and Lot saw them and got up to meet them…." The Rabbi's answer was that there was no need for the angels to reveal themselves as such, for Abraham saw the angel in every person.

Hospitality expresses a reaching out, by which we initiate a welcome to the other. This of course particularly means being able to respond to the pain and plea for

dignity, security and justice from the other. Above all it means giving the other a sense that he or she is welcome in the wider society and is a part of it. Reaching out as people of faith and in the name of our faith is especially important. It is thereby that we can overcome the fears that threaten and imperil, and be true to the values and example of Abraham, our common father. In the beautiful words of Pope John Paul II, "as the children of Abraham we are called to be a blessing to the world. In order to be such, we must first be a blessing to one another."