

**Religion, Identity & Peace in the Middle East**  
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It is 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 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.

However this fact still 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? The answer, I believe, is to a great extent implicit in the aforementioned point itself – 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. At such times 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 nurture 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, which disregards “the other” who is perceived as separate from 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, they can then 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 up 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 all our religions affirm the value of peace as an ideal for human society and see violence and war as 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. 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.

All this is not in any way to ignore the extremely important work done by a plethora of interfaith and intergroup organizations in the Holy Land. We have an Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel that serves as an umbrella organization for over seventy associations and institutions with a commitment to interfaith work, and the Abraham Fund lists over three hundred organizations working in Jewish-Arab cooperation in the fields of educational, civil society, public advocacy and philanthropy.

However all this activity is marginal to the lives of more than ninety per cent of the population for whom, if they even know of these activities at all, they are peripheral to their existence and daily concerns. As important as this work is, it has certainly been considered marginal if not categorically dismissed by the Israeli Jewish and Palestinian Muslim religious establishments.

Because religion has thus been 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 has often also reflected widespread secular alienation from religion generally). However, while this tendency is comprehensible when one considers the terrible things that have been done and are still done in our neighbourhood in the name of our religion, it is 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 from 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 (not that I am suggesting any equivalence here!).

Furthermore, in recent years, 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.

Undoubtedly the global terrorist abuse of religion has significantly contributed to a dawning realization in the world and in relation to the Middle East in particular that not only is religion, as Doug Johnston has described it, "the missing dimension of statecraft," but that if one does not engage religious institutions that reflect the most profound identities of the peoples concerned to support positive political processes, inevitably one is playing into the hands of those hostile to them. While we have to protect ourselves against threats from extremists, in order to really overcome them it is essential to strengthen the hands of the moderates. The effective way to marginalize the political abuse of religion is to demonstrate its

constructive political use to embrace the other while respecting the differences that make us who we are.

It was in this light, amidst the worst violence in recent years in the Holy Land, that a remarkable gathering took place five years ago in Alexandria, Egypt, bringing religious leaders of the three faith communities together for the first time ever in human history, to lend the voices of their respective traditions to an end to violence and to promoting peace and reconciliation. But precisely because of the fear and insecurity that separates our communities in conflict, it required a third party to bring this about. And the person to do so was the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord George Carey. Providentially, Canterbury had an institutional relationship with Al Azhar in Cairo, the fountainhead of Islamic learning in the Arab world and perhaps in the Muslim world at large, and the grand Imam of Al Azhar, Sheikh Mohammed Sayyed 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 no-one in world Jewry would 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 as on the side of constructive religious resolution of conflict rather than avoiding it. And not only President Mubarak, but of course Prime Minister Sharon and Chairman Arafat also had an interest in such. Not only did they all lend their support to this initiative despite the violence that was going on at the time, but Sharon and Arafat both personally vetted the text of the declaration.

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 Juridicial Authority, five prominent Israeli rabbis including the Sephardic Chief Rabbi, all Patriarchs including the Latin Patriarch, and the Anglican bishop. Eventually 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 for respect of the rights of both Israeli and Palestinian peoples.

Notwithstanding the ongoing violence, this was a document of great significance. While the symbolic import of this summit and its declaration should not be minimized, some practical important developments followed. For example, the significant two historic World Congresses of Imams and Rabbis for peace that took place in recent years in Brussels and Seville under the patronage of the kings of Morocco, Belgium and Spain, might well not have taken place if the Alexandria summit had not prepared the way. No less important, the latter initiated communication between the religious leaders who had previously had no ongoing contact. This led to a process in itself towards the establishment of a Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land, incorporating the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, the Supreme Shaaria Courts of the PA, and the different Patriarchates and Bishops.

This Council is being established with three purposes. Firstly to maintain open lines of communication between the religious leadership; secondly, to provide a united response in condemning and repudiating any defamation or misrepresentation in the media or by public figures of any one of the religions or faith communities; last but not least, to provide religious support for any responsible initiative of political leadership in the pursuit of peace and reconciliation.

The escalating violence and rhetoric of recent years changed a number of things in the equation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, especially concerning Jerusalem. Past popular political wisdom had held that the issue of the future of Jerusalem was so complicated that it was something that needed to be left until the end of a peace process. However the disproportionate focus on Jerusalem in recent years, epitomized in the fact that the second intifada was known as the Al Aksa intifada – i.e. the Palestinian uprising for Jerusalem, has laid rest to that assumption. Jerusalem has become the very focus of the conflict and the key to promoting partisan agendas and delegitimizing the other. Throughout the Muslim world now, there is a widespread perception if not a conviction that Israel's intentions towards the holy places of Islam on the Haram El Sharif are malevolent and that these sites are in danger. On the other hand the Jewish world is shocked by the growing denial in the Arab world and beyond there is any basis at all to Jewish attachment to the Temple Mount and that the very idea that a Temple existed there is part of a Jewish conspiracy to deny the Palestinian and Muslims connection to Jerusalem. Accordingly there is now not only a gulf of distrust between Israelis and Palestinians, there is also a process of mutual delegitimization that utilizes religious concepts and imagery to portray the conflict in religious terms. This is very dangerous indeed, for if the conflict is portrayed in terms of its original character as a territorial conflict, then it can be resolved through territorial compromise. However if the conflict is portrayed as a religious one between the Godly and the good against the godless and evil, then the bloodshed is likely to continue indefinitely. The fact is that Jerusalem – and specifically its holy sites – is now central to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the ramification go even beyond Israeli-Arab tension to those between the Muslim and Jewish faith communities and even spills over into Muslim-Christian and Muslim-West relations. If it was ever true that the future of Jerusalem could be left to the end of a political peace process, this is certainly now no longer the case. It is therefore of critical importance now for the moderate voices of religious leadership to express their recognition and respect of Jerusalem

as a city that is holy to the three faiths and to call on their respective co-religionists and followers to avoid and prevent harm to the holy places of all the religions.

However the essential need for an external Muslim host for the Alexandria summit/process not only revealed how difficult it would be (if not impossible) for such an issue to be addressed by Palestinian Muslim leadership alone; but that even if feasible, it would be doubtful whether such a declaration would have any clout in the Muslim world at large. This is even more so the case with regards to Jerusalem. Indeed we might note Arafat's comments to Clinton and Barak at Camp David that the matter of the Temple Mount/Haram Es Sharif was not one over which the Palestinians could decide exclusively, as it is a much wider Muslim concern.

In order to achieve any positive interreligious declaration on mutual acknowledgement regarding attachment to holy sites in Jerusalem and a joint call against any violence or disrespect towards these that would have real significance in the Muslim world, it is necessary to involve as many as possible of five key Arab players: the Palestinians, Jordan (which still has a special role on the Haram and which of course was confirmed by Israel in the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty), Egypt (both because of its place in the Arab World and because of Al Azhar's place in the Muslim world), Morocco (because the King of Morocco is Chairman of the Al Quds Committee of the OIC), and ideally Saudi Arabia as well, in light of its claim to be the defender of all the holy sites of Islam.

As mentioned above concerning Judaism and Christianity, while the local hierarchy by no means represents the spectrum of their co-religionists in the world, there would be little significant opposition to them assuming representation of their respective traditions for such an initiative, to bring about an end to violence and incitement and to promote mutual respect and reconciliation.

Achieving an accord of the three religious communities on Jerusalem that would affirm respect for each one's attachments and sites and adjure against any threat in word or deed would be of enormous psychological value. It would also be of great assistance for any political process if there is a will for such. Efforts at bringing all these components together to achieve an accord on Jerusalem and the Holy Sites are now underway, but of course they too are dependent on the political climate and will in order to succeed.

As indicated in my earlier comments on the role of religion in the Middle East, institutional religion cannot in itself spearhead a political peace process in this region. However as I have tried to point out, religion is an essential partner for any such process in providing the psycho-spiritual glue without which no peace initiative will succeed in bringing and keeping the essential different parts together.

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? Here, any accord between the local communities will have enormous ramifications, not only for our region but indeed for the world as a whole.