THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE PURSUIT OF PEACE

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Religion has often been criticized – especially in modern society – for having been a source of war and conflict rather than a vehicle of peace. In support of this contention, critics not only point to bloody medieval religious wars but also to current modern conflicts such as Northern Ireland and Sri Lanka, and perhaps most contemporary, in the Balkans.

Proponents of religion claim that these are not really religious conflicts, but rather territorial conflicts in which religion is used as a weapon, and state further – as did Cardinal Martini at a recent interfaith gathering in Assisi – that "such manifestations in the name of religion are nothing less than a distortion and perversion of religion," i.e. they are not religion.

I personally share Cardinal Martini's contention and thus conclude that despite our denominational doctrinal differences, our perceptions of both the essence and purpose of religion are very similar. However, there is the rub! Both he and I have colleagues who do not see the essence and purpose of their religions in the same light and there are unfortunately not a few who see their religions as justifying and encouraging hostility towards others!

Accordingly, I wish briefly to delve a little further into the character of this problem and hopefully draw constructive insights for the role of religion as a force for Peace. Religion, in essence, seeks to give meaning and direction to the place and purpose of our existence in the world. It is thus bound up with all the circles of human interaction, from the most minimal, such as family, to the maximal – humanity, or even the creation as a whole.

These circles make up our identity as not only individuals but also as social beings. From family through congregations, communities, ethnic groups, nations, peoples of faith, to international frameworks. These are the building blocks of our multi-faceted identities and we ignore these components at our peril. Indeed, modern ethnologists and popular social anthropologists have attributed much of modern disorientation and alienation to the breakdown of traditional society and these building blocks, especially of family and community. Alvin Toffler, for example, in his book *Future Shock*, highlighted the problem of mass deracination in modern society and the serious destabilizing consequences of such ruthlessness. He and others like Robert Ardrey have explained the proliferation of religious sects and cults, as well as the drug culture and other such phenomena in modern society, as the search for meaning and identity amidst a void resulting from the breakdown of traditional societies and the concomitant vacuity and loss of identity.

In this inextricable relationship between religion and identity, religion gives meaning and purpose to our understanding of who we are, as part of smaller units or circles that

broaden to make up the wider circles and greatest whole. However, in affirming who we are as part of those smaller circles, identity at the same time declares who we are not. Accordingly, the components of our corporate identities may be used not only for positive affirmation, but also for negative division and conflict, whether these be between families, communities, ethnic or national groups. Because religion is so inextricably bound up with the different components of our identities, where these are used negatively, religion is caught up all too often as part and parcel of such conflicts, exacerbating hostility instead of combatting it, as we see in so many parts of our world still today.

However, precisely because all religion addresses not only the smallest components of identity but also the broadest, religion has precisely the very capacity to counteract conflict and exploitation of differences through emphasizing those dimensions of human commonality that should bind people together above and beyond the particular, different components of our identities.

Yet it requires a high degree of security and stability as part of the smaller circle within the wider circle to be able to relate positively to the latter.

In his work, Robert Ardrey draws on zoological parallels to point out that paradoxically a degree of absence of security, i.e. a threat to one's security, is itself the most effective stimulus of particular identity, e.g. societies in times of conflict. Accordingly, sociologically, religion acquires far greater dominance in times of insecurity, precisely as a vehicle for nurturing the particular identity that is threatened or undermined. Rene Girard points out, in "Violence and the Sacred," that in such conditions of threat and insecurity, societies develop the need to identify an object of blame – a scapegoat, in which religion facilitates in its own most special way. Moreover, in a situation of direct conflict, the opponent is usually demonized in order to strengthen a sense of justification of one's identity, position and claim. Sometimes such needs even breed an astounding obsessive compulsion to present the scapegoat, or perceived threat, or even real threat, as the totality of evil, in what the historian Richard Hafstader describes as the image of "a perfect model of malice." In such a context, religion as a vehicle of comfort and security in the face of a real or perceived threat, to the particular identity concerned, is likely to be so caught up in this role that its function becomes totally overwhelmingly introspective, reflecting the insecurity of the particular group involved. All too often in such context, it becomes a vehicle for the pursuit of xenophobia and bigotry and betrays its ultimate metier, alienating itself from the wider circles of our universal human identity.

However, there is no solution in eliminating the particularistic aspects of our identity, as some would advocate. Indeed as mentioned, particular components of our identities are so fundamental to our inner being and psycho-spiritual welfare that in fact only a universalism that emerges out of our particularisms has any hope of contributing to peaceful co-existence. Indeed a universalism that does not respect these particularisms, is if not of morally dubious motivation, certainly of dubious moral consequence, inevitably manifested in cultural imperialism and triumphalism. But ultimately it is unsustainable and evanescent for without it is without real roots and stability.

Thus the challenge that we face is how to facilitate the greater expression of the universal religious values on the part of particular religious communities. To this end, I believe we

must give due attention to the aforementioned sociological insights regarding religion and identity; to what Ardrey describes as "the most basic human need of security;" to the role religion plays in the quest for such, and of how when security is most threatened, religion gets caught up with this need all too often at the expense of its more universal values and aspirations. In light of this understanding we may comprehend the regrettable reality that while from time to time there are individuals of remarkable stature who rise above the rest; as a rule, the representatives of institutional religion – reflecting rather than leading their communities – are likely to apply themselves to relations between and beyond their communities if the latter feel threatened, whether by political or economic or socio-psychological conditions. In fact, for precisely these reasons institutional religion itself is unlikely to be the vehicle for resolution of such conditions.

Nevertheless, when breakthroughs do take place and these conditions improve, then institutional religion may and must play a crucial role in providing the psycho-spiritual glue necessary for securing the processes of development and peace. This is surely the opportunity and the demand of the situation in the Middle East today. In order to do so however, the need for security must not be underestimated. A positive attitude towards the wider circles of identity of which people are a part requires that they feel secure in their inner circles of identity in relation to the former. As mentioned, this means not only security from military threat and physical violence, and not only security from economic threat, but also security from the threat of disrespect and vilification.

Accordingly an obvious point needs to be emphasized: if our religions are to be a force for peace in our relations with each other in this time of political breakthrough, then we must explicitly teach respect for each other. Indeed the implication of the above thesis is that this is essential not only for the security of the other, but ultimately for our own security and wellbeing. Essential for true respect is a degree of modesty.

Arrogance, our religions teach, is tantamount to idolatry – to the worship of self. While each of us believes his or her particular religion to be truthful, the presumption that truth is exclusively contained only in one's own particular religion is religious arrogance if not worse, limiting the Divine relationship with humankind. Indeed, it should be easiest for us – all the children of Abraham, the sister religions of ethical monotheism – to be able to appreciate the Divine value within each other's tradition. If we have not done so and do not do so, I would suggest, it is either because the burden of history and bad experience weighs so heavily on our shoulders, making us so bent over that we do not stand up straight and look each other in the eye, truthfully and faithfully; or it is because religious arrogance blinds our sight.

However, not only does true respect mean striving to see and understand others as they see and understand themselves, it should also mean willingness for self-criticism. The willingness to acknowledge that both as individuals and also as communities we are not perfect, and the desire to improve ourselves accordingly, is not only essential in avoiding the pitfalls of religious arrogance, but it is also essential for the improvement of self and society to which each of our religions aspires. In Judaism this ultimate ideal of perfecting our world is expressed through the concept of the sanctification of the Divine Name. To this end the way we behave towards those who are not members of our own community is of vital importance. The Midrash (Seder Eliahu Rabbah, Ch. 26) declares that this is more

important than the way we behave towards those who are members of our own community. For Moses Maimonides, arguably the greatest Spanish Jew, there are other fundamental reasons for the highest ethical conducted towards all human beings regardless of race or creed. In his code of Jewish practice, the *Yad Hahazakeh*, in the section entitled "Laws of Kings," Ch. L0, para. Ll, we find the following passage:

"Our sages commanded us to visit the sick even of heathens and to bury their dead with the dead of Israel and to provide for their poor amidst the poor of Israel for the sake of "the ways of Peace", for behold it is stated "and his mercies are extended to all His creatures (Psalm l45, v. 9) and it is stated (Torah's) ways are pleasant ways and all her paths are peace."(Proverbs 3 v. l7)

This text, including the latter quotation, is taken from the Talmud (Tractate Gittin 59b) where it is also stated that "The whole Torah, (i.e. the whole of Judaism), is for the sake of "the ways of Peace."   Accordingly, the use of quotation "all her paths are peace" is clear. Even if not stated explicitly in the Torah, there are deeds and actions that nevertheless constitute Torah-true conduct – conduct that is in true consonance with the teleology and purpose of Torah and of the revealed Divine Will, and that is conduct that promotes peace in the world. Indeed our sages of old in the Midrash declare this to be the goal of the Divine Creation itself.

Yet arguably even more illuminating is Maimonides' own introduction of the quotation from Psalm l45, v. 9, "and His mercies are extended to all His creatures."   Why does Maimonides introduce the topic of theology, i.e.: the nature of the Divine character, when his code is concerned with legal specifications of practical human conduct towards others?   Evidently, Maimonides is referring here to the theological impulse for the right conduct; namely, the sublime Torah teachings of imitatio Dei (Leviticus l9 v. l): "to cleave to the Lord" (Deuteronomy l0 v. 20) and "to walk in His Ways" (Deuteronomy l3 v. 5). Jewish tradition understands the latter to mean emulating – to the extent of our human ability – the Divine Attributes of mercy, loving-kindness, truthfulness and forgiveness (cf. Exodus 34 v. 6). In the words of Abba Shaul, "Just as He is gracious and compassionate, so you be gracious and compassionate" (Mekhilta, Canticles 3). Similarly, the Babylonian Talmud expounds, "Just as the Lord clothes the naked as He did with Adam and Eve, so you clothe the naked. Just as the Lord visited the sick, as He did with Abraham, so you visit the sick. Just as the Lord comforts the bereaved, as he did with Isaac, so you comfort the bereaved. Just as the Lord buries the dead, as He did with Moses, so you bury the dead" (Tractate Sotah l4a).

Accordingly, Maimonides is reminding us that just as God's "compassion extends to all His creatures", so we must emulate such compassion to all, especially (as the Torah itself emphasizes) towards the vulnerable – and not only the vulnerable of our own community, the poor, the orphan, and the widow; but also and in particular – the stranger. Precisely, this principle and such practice demonstrating respect and responsibility towards the other are described in Jewish tradition as "the ways of Peace." In other words, if we really care about Peace, we will behave with respect and compassion to all human beings regardless of race or creed.

In this new era for us in the Middle East and in the Mediterranean as a whole, religion has a crucial role to play in promoting such respect and responsibility towards others, based on the profound religio-ethical teachings that we share. But the challenge will only be met if our religions teach respect towards others not just on the basis of the universal principle of our common humanity, but also of recognition and respect for our different particularities. Such teaching and conduct will afford us all the sense of psychological security that, together with improved political and economic conditions, we will enable our communities to relate effectively and positively to each other in the years ahead.

When we thus rise above fear and insecurity and avoid the pitfalls of scapegoating, stereotyping and demonizing, and open our communities to seeing the Divine Spirit that is reflected in the life of the other, then we live up to the noblest vision of our Abrahamic tradition. For Abraham, "God's friend," is mandated to be "a blessing" to all humankind; and as our Jewish sages tell us, the greatest of all societal blessings is that of peace, declaring that "God only created the world so that there would be peace amongst all" (Numbers Rabbah l2, l).