

The Importance of Interfaith Cooperation in Relation to the Holy Sites

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The subject of my presentation is the need for inter-religious cooperation regarding Holy Sites as a means to reduce tension and promote peaceful coexistence in our region – something that has global ramifications.

The need for such initiatives is predicated on certain assumptions (some of which come from scholarly observations on the sociology of religion).

The first of these is the recognition that, while the Israel-Arab conflict and specifically the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are territorial conflicts and not in themselves religious conflicts (e.g. the reasons that led people like Egypt's Gamal Abdul Nasser and Israel's David Ben Gurion to war were not the pursuit of a theocratic goal nor theological sentiment and motivation), nevertheless religion is inextricably bound up, to a greater or lesser extent and in many different ways and forms, with the identities of the peoples involved in the territorial struggle.¹

Secondly, as is well noted, when identities feel threatened, especially in the context of violent conflict, they tend to withdraw and become more insular.² At the same time they are inclined to be increasingly self-righteous (to give their struggle justification) and often tend to delegitimize, or at least diminish, the other's position.

As religion is so inextricably bound up with identities, in a situation of external threat religion itself tends to both reflect these aforementioned characteristics and reinforce them. Thus we tend to find that in conflict situations, religion often tends to exacerbate mutual alienation and compound the conflict.

Yet religion itself has potentially precisely the capacity to be an enormously potent force in overcoming barriers and divisions through its emphasis (in all the religious traditions that are present in this region) on the One Source of all life and thus the common bond between all humanity – all, as the Bible puts it, created in the Divine Image.³ Accordingly Islam, Christianity and Judaism all emphasize the sanctity of human life and the inalienability of human dignity. Regrettably, all too often fear and insecurity, with concomitant insularity and demonization of the other, triumph over the universal values that our religions teach.

Beyond these general observations is the specific acknowledgement that institutional religion in our part of the world – certainly Islam and also Judaism – is generally subject to, if not actually appointed by, the respective political authorities.⁴ Thus it is overwhelmingly clerical in character and unlikely to assume any "prophetic" challenge to respective political authorities. Accordingly when there is no desire on the part of the latter to resolve conflict, this political control of institutional religion serves as an additional negative factor. However where there

¹ Viz. <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2006/issue1/jv10no1a5.html>

² http://www.gmu.edu/academic/ijps/vol2_1/Reyschler.htm

³ Genesis 5, v.1

⁴ http://www.geocities.com/alabasters_archive/orthodox_rabbinate.html ;
http://www.themedialine.org/news/news_detail.asp?NewsID=14477

is in principle a desire to resolve conflict – even if it is not always accompanied by willingness to make the accommodations necessary for such – nevertheless then the link between political authority and institutional religious leadership can actually enable the latter to be a more powerful agent in contributing towards a reduction of hostility and the promotion of a better atmosphere.

Yet the fact is that peace initiatives in our region have overwhelmingly ignored the religious component. Indeed the general tendency of their respective masters, namely the political authorities, was to keep them far away from anything that had any bearing on the political direction of the region as a whole. I recall on a visit in Egypt where I was part of a group that was received by President Mubarak, at a time when the peace process was still moving ahead albeit at a painfully slow pace⁵, that one of our company suggested that it would be important to bring religious leadership together and that he might play a role in helping that. "Religious leaders," Mubarak responded, "you should keep far away from them. That is a very dangerous idea." Similarly, I believe it was a significant factor in the failure of the Middle East peace process that, on the lawn of the White House when the famous handshake took place,⁶ one saw no visible religious leadership of the Jewish or Muslim communities in the Holy Land expressing a desire to find a way out of the regional conflicts. The message was clear: religion is something to be kept out of the process. In fact, it compounded a sense of alienation on the part of the most fervently religious elements within both communities who did their best to bring it down (not that I am suggesting any equivalence here!).⁷ I think there is now the beginnings of a recognition that not only is religion as it has been described by Douglas Johnson, as "the missing art of statecraft,"⁸ but that if one does not bring in religious institutions, that reflect the most profound identities of the people in our part of the world, in a constructive way to support positive political processes, inevitably you are playing into the hands of those hostile to them. Critical to efforts to overcome the extremists is the need to strengthen the hands of the moderates, and essential in working to marginalize the abuse of religion is the need to demonstrate its constructive use to enable the embrace of the other while respecting the differences that make us who we are. Arguably it is now more evident than ever that if one does not want religion to be part of the problem, one has to ensure that it is part and parcel of the solution.

This need has become even more acute in recent years when a basically territorial conflict has become "religionized," i.e. portrayed increasingly as being a religious conflict. The fact that the violence which erupted in the autumn of 2001 was called the Al Aksa Intifada has highlighted this.⁹ Indeed increasingly throughout the Muslim world there is a perception that Muslim holy sites are under threat and in jeopardy from Israeli malevolent intent.¹⁰ On the other hand, Jews both in Israel and throughout the world sense that their historic attachment to Jerusalem and the

⁵ <http://www.pcusa.org/pcnews/oldnews/2002/02122.htm>

⁶ http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/september/13/newsid_3053000/3053733.stm

⁷ http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/february/25/newsid_4167000/4167929.stm;

<http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/9511/rabin/umbrella/index.html>;

<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=471784&contrassID=13>

⁸ Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson, eds., *Religion: the Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Aqsa_Intifada

¹⁰ <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/786/re5.htm>

Temple Mount is overwhelmingly denied and derided in the Muslim world.¹¹ Thus we not only have a breakdown of whatever trust existed between Israelis and Palestinians before the violence, but we have an increasing religious delegitimization of the other's religious identity and attachments.

The importance of this psychological dimension cannot be underestimated and the need for religious institutional authorities to take a lead in countervailing such negative attitudes is of urgent importance.

It was out of such concern that the Alexandria Summit, of leaders of the three main religions of the Holy Land, was convened in 2002 – something which had never taken place before. This historic event was the initiative of then Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. George Carey, who had been visiting the Holy Land when the second Intifada was at its height and in meeting with leaders of different communities was urged to help bridge the widening chasm. Providentially Dr. Carey had an institutional relationship with Al Azhar, the fountainhead of Sunni Islamic learning in the Arab world, indeed in the Muslim world at large.¹² It was crucial that there be a significant Arab Muslim host, because the political and security pressures in Israel/Palestine made it very difficult indeed, if not impossible, to bring the religious leaders together locally. Moreover, while the Chief Rabbis of Israel do not represent all religious Jews in Israel, let alone in the world, nevertheless their standing would be recognized among Jewry, especially if they were to play a role in religious 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 overwhelming majority of the Christian world. But Palestinian Islamic leadership does not enjoy such standing throughout the Muslim world that would ensure that its voice would be accepted, heard and respected on behalf of Islam. Thus the need to have the head of the major institution of Islamic learning support this process was of critical importance. Moreover, in the wake of September 11, political leaders like President Mubarak had an interest in being seen on the side of, rather than against, constructive religious resolution of conflict. Of course, Prime Minister Sharon and Chairman Arafat also had a similar interest. Indeed, to the surprise of many they all lent their support to this initiative despite the violence that was going on at the time,¹³ to bring together religious leaders in Alexandria.¹⁴ The man who coordinated the meeting was Canon Andrew White of Coventry Cathedral, who served as the Archbishop of Canterbury's emissary in this endeavor. The key personality on the Israeli side in coordinating with the political and religious authorities was Rabbi Michael Melchior, who was then Israel's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs; additionally, mention should be made of the WCRP¹⁵ and the Norwegian Church, which both provided resources to enable the event to take place. This was indeed an historic event, not least of all precisely for the reason that I have mentioned, that never before had the heads of the different three faith communities in the Holy Land ever come together. And while the Mufti of Jerusalem was not there, four leading Sheikhs from the establishment's

¹¹ <http://www.likud.nl/extr334.html>

¹² <http://www.alazhar.org/>

¹³ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3677206.stm

¹⁴ <http://www.pcusa.org/pcnews/oldnews/2002/02122.htm>

¹⁵ <http://www.wcrp.org/>

structure of the Palestinian authority were present, including the head of the Supreme Islamic Court, which had been mandated to represent Palestinians at the initiative of the President of the Palestinian Authority participated. Present also were five Israeli rabbis, including the Sephardic Chief Rabbi; and Christian leaders including the Latin Patriarch (all Patriarchs were represented) and a significant document was produced, albeit something of a camel, put together by a committee with various degrees of brinkmanship going on both before and in Alexandria. Each delegation was in contact with their respective political leadership regarding the details of the text. The final text condemned the violent abuse of religion, suicidal homicides, and all actions that are oppressive and destructive of human life and dignity; it called for a cessation of all violence and withdrawal of forces from the territories under the Palestinian authority in consequence of there being an end to acts of terrorism; it called for the parties to return to the negotiating table and to recognize the importance of religion as a force of reconciliation; it called for respect of the rights of both peoples and the sanctity of holy sites, ensuring access to them and freedom of worship. Especially in face of the ongoing violence, this was a document of significance.¹⁶

While the Declaration did not bring any diminution in the violence, it was an important testimony and led to a number of important developments. I will refer shortly to what was probably the most important of these.

However, the Alexandria Summit also revealed some very specific realities. Firstly it was only possible to convene the religious leaders through an outside "third party" – in this case, the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey. But even then, without a prominent external Muslim presence playing a key role – in this case, the Grand Imam of Al Azhar, Sheikh Mohammed El Tantawi, hosting the gathering – the summit would not have been feasible either.

As a result of all the above, we may state the following: the issue of Jerusalem – and specifically its holy sites – is now central to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and in fact goes even beyond Israeli-Arab tension to those between the Muslim and Jewish faith communities and even spills over into Muslim-Christian relations.¹⁷ 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. The dangerous delegitimizations in relation to Jerusalem make it an urgent imperative to get the leaders of the three faith communities to issue some basic expression of mutual acknowledgement, respect for and thus rejection of any disrespect let alone violence towards the holy places of the other faiths.¹⁸

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. Indeed we might note Arafat's comments to

¹⁶ <http://www.rabbi-david-rosen.net/Events%20&%20Reports/Alexandria%20Declaration.doc> ;
http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/2000_2009/2002/1/The%20First%20Alexandria%20Declaration%20of%20the%20Religious

¹⁷ <http://www.pcusa.org/pcnews/oldnews/2000/00282.htm>

¹⁸ <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=6>

Clinton and Barak at Camp David,¹⁹ 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 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 treaty²⁰), 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),²¹ and ideally Saudi Arabia as well, in light of its claim to be the defender of all the holy sites of Islam.

As far as Judaism and Christianity are concerned, while the local hierarchy by no means represents the spectrum of their co-religionists in the world, there would be little opposition to them assuming representation of their respective traditions in such an initiative.

As already mentioned, aside from its symbolic significance, the Alexandria Summit produced some important "spin-offs." For example, the significant two World Congresses of Imams and Rabbis²² could probably not have taken place without the way having been paved by the Alexandria Summit. However, arguably the most important development was the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land, which is in formation. This Council incorporates the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, the Supreme Shaaria Courts of the PA, and the different Patriarchates and Bishoprics. The goals of the Council are three: Firstly to maintain open lines of communication between the religious leadership, secondly to stand together against the defamation/disrespect or any attack on any one of the three faith communities, and thirdly to support appropriate political initiatives for the resolution of the conflict and the promotion of peace.

This Council would be the natural local kernel in any kind of interreligious summit regarding the future of Jerusalem and the Holy sites in the Holy Land, which would affirm mutual acknowledgement and call on their respective adherents to refrain from any negative behavior in relation to the holy sites/places of other faith communities. Indeed, the ultimate goal of such a summit would be to mandate the local body to work on behalf of the three faiths to provide a regimen for interfaith co-operation in particular regarding the Holy Sites.

Obviously, such an initiative could not come from a particular denominational source and thus it has been essential to find a non-denominational NGO to pursue this vision and enlist the relevant governments as well as religious authorities.

¹⁹ <http://www.jcpa.org/jl/vp474.htm>

²⁰ <http://www.kinghussein.gov.jo/peacetreaty.html>

²¹ <http://www.oic-un.org/about/over.htm>

²² <http://www.arabicnews.com/ansub/Daily/Day/040325/2004032521.html> ;
<http://www.moroccotimes.com/Paper/article.asp?idr=6&id=13647> ;
<http://www.arabicnews.com/ansub/Daily/Day/040325/2004032521.html>

Such a declaration and such a mandate for interreligious cooperation regarding holy sites will not bring about a political breakthrough in itself. Without political leadership to this end, no resolution of the conflict is possible. However, political attempts to bring about such a goal that do not take religion seriously and that do not engage religious leadership in the process are likely to fail. The Holy Sites of the three faiths play a key role in this regard and only the positive involvement of religious institutions and representatives in this regard can provide the psycho-spiritual glue necessary to enable a political process to hold together and succeed.