

## Contemporary Use and Abuse of Religion in International Relations

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Despite their significant differences, religions share quintessential social values. Especially within the “family of Abraham,” there are fundamental affirmations which serve as the foundations for human solidarity and reconciliation: namely that our world has meaning and purpose as the design and product of the Divine Creator, the God of Mercy, Justice, Love and Peace, who calls on us all to emulate these qualities as humans in society. Whether we talk of the human being as “created in the image of God,” as in the Jewish and Christian traditions, or as Islam puts it as “the most sublime of God's Creation,” all three traditions affirm the sanctity of human life and the inalienability of human dignity.

These shared Abrahamic teachings, as well as origins, should lead Jews, Christians and Muslims to a special relationship of cooperation as well as universal solidarity. Yet if we are not to fall into the impotent and unproductive posture of uncritical apologetics, we will not ignore the fact that religion has not always served to enhance respect for human life and dignity of others, even and often especially within the Abrahamic family; indeed, violence has often been and sometimes still is performed in the very name of religion itself. This ongoing desecration of the Divine Name is tragic for us all. However, it also begs the fundamental question: how is it that that which affirms these universal truths can be a vehicle for their denial?

It appears that the answer lies substantially in the socio-cultural contexts in which religion functions. Because religions seek to give meaning and direction to the place and purpose of our existence in the world, they are thus bound up with all the circles of human interaction from the most minimal, such as family, to the broadest, such as humanity and Creation as a whole. These circles make up our identity, not only as individuals but also as social beings. From family, congregations, communities and ethnic groups to nations and international frameworks, these are the building blocks of our multi-faceted

identities. Yet, 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 those building blocks of identity, especially family and community. Alvin Toffler, in his book *Future Shock*, highlighted the problem of mass deracination in modern society and the serious destabilizing consequences of such rootlessness. While the phenomenon of contemporary counter-culture has substantially been a reaction against modern secular vacuity, obsessive materialism and the rat race of contemporary life, Toffler and others, like Robert Ardrey, have explained the proliferation of sects and cults as well as the drug culture and other such phenomena in modern society as also reflecting the search for meaning and identity amidst a void resulting from the breakdown of traditional societies and the concomitant disorientation and loss of identity.

In the inextricable relationship between identity and religion, 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. 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 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 itself is caught up all too often as part and parcel of such conflicts, exacerbating hostility instead of combating it, as we still see in so many parts of our world today.

In his work *The Territorial Imperative*, Robert Ardrey draws upon zoological parallels to highlight the paradox that 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 tends to acquire far greater prominence in times of insecurity, precisely as a vehicle for nurturing the particular identity that is threatened or undermined.

Such conditions of threat and insecurity intensify the insight of Rene Girard, in his book *Violence and the Sacred*, on the need to identify an object of blame - a scapegoat, 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, as the totality of evil, in what the historian Richard Hafstader describes as the image of "a perfect model of malice." In such context, religion as a vehicle of comfort and security, in the face of actual or envisioned threat to the particular identity concerned, is likely to be so caught up in this role that its function becomes totally and overwhelmingly introspective, reflecting the insecurity and even trauma of the particular group involved. All too often in such a context, it becomes a vehicle for the pursuit of xenophobia and bigotry and betrays its ultimate métier, alienating itself from the wider circles of our universal human identity.

The image of a spiral may be useful to clarify this concept. The essential smaller particular components of our identity spiral out to enrich the wider circles of our human identity as they open up into them. But they will only do so if they feel secure in their particular identity in relation to the wider context. If the particular component is insecure – often exacerbating previous trauma (generally unresolved) – its alienation will lead that circle of identity to cut itself off from the wider circle, denying and defying the outward spiral. The source of that alienation may be historical trauma or contemporary conflict; it may be oppression of a racial, economic or political character or whatever. But the reactions share a perception of severe isolation from other groups and/or the wider society. Isolationism, extreme nationalism, and what is unscientifically yet popularly described as “fundamentalism,” are expressions of such alienation in which not only is religion invariably enlisted to provide succor, strength and justification, but the “other” is demonized to this end as well.

Much of this trauma conditioned syndrome today reflects certain communities' intense insecurity in relation to Western power, technological and consumerist success, often referred to under the rubric of “globalization.” These alienated

groups, for whom religion serves to provide a sense of self worth, use religious teachings and historical sources selectively to bolster their perception of themselves precisely as islands of godliness within an overwhelming hostile godless sea; they portray even other religions as part of the latter and all who cooperate with it as part of the problem. Thus a vicious cycle of increasing fear, withdrawal and demonization is compounded in which an exclusive religious ideology nurturing anti-modern alienation from society at large, is married to modern technology in a manner capable of wreaking havoc and destruction on an unparalleled scale as we have seen in recent times.

Of course, precisely because religion addresses not only the smallest components of identity but also the broadest, it is religion that has precisely the very capacity to counteract conflict and negative exploitation of our differences, through emphasizing those dimensions of human identity and commonality that should bind people together in human solidarity, above and beyond the particular different components of our identities. Yet as indicated, to do so requires a good sense of security and stability in one's own identity within the wider context, and almost by definition this is generally lacking not only in contexts of conflict, but in a mindset of trauma from historical and/or contemporary injury and humiliation.

There are those who think that the problem of the abuse of religion in international life requires the elimination of particularism. However as mentioned before, modern sociological studies have highlighted just how crucial the particular components of our identities are to our inner being and psycho-spiritual welfare, to the degree that in fact their absence precisely renders people even more vulnerable to extreme particularistic reactionary responses. In fact, only a universalism that emerges out of our particularisms has any hope of contributing to peaceful co-existence. Moreover 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 it is without real roots and stability.

Thus the challenge that we face is how to facilitate the greater expression of the universal values on the part of particular religious communities in our modern world, without devaluing those positive national or ethnic characteristics. 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 to how, when security is most threatened, religion invariably embraces this need, all too often at the expense of its most universal values and aspirations.

Accordingly, we may comprehend the regrettable reality that while from time to time there are individuals of remarkable stature who rise above the rest; all too often, the representatives of institutional religion - reflecting rather than leading their communities - are unlikely to apply themselves to relationships beyond their communities if the latter feel threatened and/or traumatized, whether by historical circumstance, political, economic or socio-psychological conditions. In fact, precisely for these reasons, elements within religious institutions and hierarchies can often serve as obstacles, rather than be an impetus for reconciliation, preferring the walls of isolation and insularity to the embrace of “the other.”

Breaking down barriers of hostility and conflict actually facilitates the expression of the universal dimensions within our traditions; thus those elements within our traditions that seek to emphasize only the particular at the expense of the universal are threatened by such a process. Indeed while Huntington’s term “clash of civilizations” has become popular parlance, the truth of the matter is that the clash is actually within civilizations themselves. They are the conflicts between those of us who would like to live insulated in an exclusive world – seeing those who do not share our views, let alone other traditions, as hostile - and those in our traditions who, while they do not seek the elimination of our particularities, nevertheless strive for their expression within a broader human solidarity.

Notwithstanding this is the fact that the last two decades have seen a burgeoning of interreligious cooperation, interfaith associations, dialogues, conferences and even interreligious initiatives for reconciliation and peace, which in historical terms is quite amazing.

Among the different interfaith organizations with which I am honored to be associated is the World Conference of Religions for Peace, of which I am the International President. It embraces more than a dozen different religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism in all their denominational varieties are only three of these!) and more than fifty countries. It has both initiated the establishment of interreligious councils and is itself constituted by some of these, which have played and play remarkable roles around the world in promoting interfaith cooperation and reconciliation – in places such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka and the Middle East.

But perhaps most important is the respect that such interfaith organizations and encounters facilitate on the part of one community for another, helping to overcome the sense of insecurity and alienation that has historically prevailed between the different ethnic and cultural communities.

Nevertheless, the paradoxical vicious cycle of conflict, withdrawal and mutual demonization all too often prevail in our world today, not least of all in the Holy Land itself where I live and about which I would like to add some specific observations.

To begin with, the Middle East substantially reflects the aforementioned challenge of a cultural environment that is generally foreign to a pluralistic acceptance of diversity. No less problematic is the fact that religious education, and thus the institutions that produce local religious leadership, generally eschew a broad general and critical education – particularly in the humanities- and thus produce a very narrow-minded world outlook.

For all these and other reasons, there has been a tendency on the part of those who have pursued a political agenda of reconciliation (usually reflecting

an opposing more secular-pluralistic world view) to avoid religious institutions and their representatives, perceiving them as detrimental to the process. While this attitude has been understandable in the shadow of the mischief and damage done in the name of religion, it has been, I believe, a tragic mistake that has actually played in to the problem and compounded it. As indicated above, religion is inextricably bound up with human identities, especially in the Middle East. The only way to prevent it from becoming more and more of a problem is to make it part of the solution. Ignoring it will only continue to reinforce it as part of the problem.

This, I believe, was part and parcel of the failure of the peace process, evident during and in the wake of the Oslo Accords. In a simplistic metaphor, one might say that the obvious absence of any identifiable Israeli Jewish or Palestinian Muslim religious figures on the lawn of the White House, when the famous handshakes took place in September 1993, conveyed an implicit negative message to the most fervent religious communities amongst both Muslim Palestinians and Israeli Jews that the peace process was inimical to their interests, and thus something to struggle against! Indeed, from within each of these communities, *mutatis mutandis*, came arguably the most significant contribution to the collapse of the process – all too often in the most horribly violent way!

The need to take religion seriously in addressing and preventing potential threats is understood better today than before, in the wake of the horrors of September 11 2001. Indeed it was the increasing awareness of such that led both Israeli and Palestinian, as well as Egyptian political leadership, to support and facilitate the initiative to bring some fifteen official leaders and representatives of the three faiths of the Holy Land together in Alexandria a year and a half ago. For the first time ever, three Patriarchs of the Holy Land, the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, and the leading Palestinian Muslim Ulema, came together to produce a historic declaration condemning violence against innocents in the name of religion as a desecration of religion itself. The declaration also called for mutual respect for religious attachments and holy sites, and for work in peace and reconciliation.

The fact that political realities on the ground in the Holy Land have prevented this declaration and the ongoing meetings of the committee (made up from the participants at the Alexandria Summit) from having any significant impact upon the lives of Israelis and Palestinians, does indeed inter alia emphasize that religion cannot spearhead political change in the Middle East (Indeed, religious authorities are usually beholden and subordinate to and even appointed by the political authorities!). However, this does not diminish in the slightest from the enormous potential of such initiatives when political movement does in fact take place. For without the psycho-spiritual glue provided by the voice of religion that is inextricably bound up with local identities, no political peace process will succeed in holding together!

The fact is that if religion is not introduced as a handmaiden of constructive developments in international relations, especially where identities are strong, it will inevitably be exploited destructively! This is a challenge above all for political leadership.

Paradoxically it is precisely the introduction of religious voices into political processes of reconciliation that will facilitate the expression of their own universal voices, just as their exclusion from these processes will reduce their universal message so crucial for human welfare and peace.

In summation let me say that there are many important reasons to pursue interreligious dialogue.

To begin with, I would describe it as a religious imperative in itself and not only because my faith teaches the principal obligation of pursuing peace. Also, there is recognition that if God relates to us in all our diversity, there must be diverse ways of relating to God, and thus no one faith can claim a monopoly on that relationship. Accordingly the encounter with another –



especially one who is himself or herself a person of religious faith, conscious of the Divine in the world – is itself an encounter with the Divine presence.

However as indicated, interreligious and intercultural dialogue is also an essential act of hospitality: demonstrating respect for the “other,” enabling us to overcome our historic or more contemporary traumas and most profound insecurities, enabling us to be more true to and expressive of the universalist aspirations of our particularist traditions.

Last and not least, religion is – as Douglas Johnston has insightfully pointed out – “the missing dimension of statecraft”! Precisely because of its inextricable relationship with our diverse human identities, interreligious dialogue is an essential component in facilitating peaceful reconciliation in international relations for the wellbeing of our world as a whole.