

## **The Religious Dimension in Middle East Politics**

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The moral visions that are at the heart of the Abrahamic religions appear overwhelmingly and ironically tarnished, especially when looking through a Middle Eastern perspective. Religions seem to be more a vehicle of exclusion, isolation, hostility and violence than what they claim to be – paths to justice, peace and reconciliation!

Indeed the easy abuse of religion around the world poses some very tough moral questions for the adherents of the different faiths (even though most of them seem oblivious if not indifferent to them).

A large part of this problem has to do with the inextricable relationship between religion and identity. As religion seeks to give meaning to who we are, it is bound up with all the circles of our human identity – from the smallest components as individuals and members of families, to the larger circles of communities, peoples, etc. When these smaller circles function in a secure environment, they can open up and enrich the wider circles. However when they feel insecure and threatened, they tend to shut out the wider circle out of a sense of self-preservation, all too often demonizing those outside, portraying the other in a manner that the historian Richard Hafstadter describes as a “perfect picture of malice.” In such situations religion itself all too often becomes part of the problem, nurturing isolation, insularity and demonization of the other, and betraying its higher moral métier.

Of course the absence of religion will not prevent the abuse of human identity. Religion simply tends to intensify both the constructive and destructive use of such.

In the Middle East, this problem is accentuated first and foremost by an environment that is usually 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 secular education – particularly in the humanities- and thus produce a very narrow-minded world outlook.

For these and other reasons, there has been a tendency on the part of those who have pursued a political agenda of reconciliation, to avoid religious institutions and their representatives, viewing 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 an increasingly larger part of the problem is to make it part of the solution. Ignoring it will only make it more part of the former.

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 analysis, 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 message to the most fervently

religious communities amongst both Palestinians and Israelis; namely, that the peace process was inimical to their interests, and thus as something to struggle against! Indeed, each of these communities, mutatis mutandis, made its significant contribution to the collapse of the process.

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 the idea of bringing some fifteen official leaders and representatives of the three faiths of the Holy Land together in Alexandria, 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 the religious attachments of the others and to work for peace and reconciliation.

The fact that political realities here on the ground 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, it 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!