

“The Role Religions Should Play in a Conflicted World”

David Rosen – ICCJ Conference, Rome, June 2015

In keeping with the introduction to this session in the conference program, it seems important to address the question why it *is* that Religions often (perhaps more often than not) do **not** play the role they should, in contexts of conflict in our world? Why does religion seem so frequently to exacerbate conflict, rather than help resolve it and promote the peace and reconciliation that it officially preaches?

The sages of the Talmudic period showed an amazing willingness for self-critique in this regard when they declared that Torah – used here to mean the Jewish religion as a whole – can be *sam hachayim*, the elixir of life, or *sam hamavet*, the potion of death. Religion can be the most powerful force of vivification and it can also be a most potent poison. But this begs the question, what *is* it that leads to the abuse – sometimes the most terrible abuse - of religion?

The eleventh century scholar Yehudah Halevi long preceded Lord Acton when, in his magnum opus *The Kuzari*, he appears to suggest that the problem is essentially the human abuse of power. When Religion is linked to Power structures, it will inevitably betray its most noble *métier*.

Yet much violence in the name of religion today, derives from **powerlessness**, precisely reflecting the alienation of the marginalized.

Of course, we must not fall into the trap of assuming that Religions are the same thing across confessional or geographic lines. Indeed often the same religion can be a very different thing in one place than another; and its relationship to and role in a society may vary from one extreme to another. However a popular social scientist has described Religion as consisting of three “B”s – Belief, Behavior and Belonging; and different religions may often be different combinations or emphases of these. The abuse of religion has often been related to the first two of these; but I think it has far more to do, especially today, with the third component and 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 wellbeing 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 the disorientated who have lost traditional compasses of orientation.) These components 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 ourselves or perceive ourselves to be.

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.

However in contexts of conflict, identity (and what is referred to today as “identity politics”) tends to be not just a nurturing of positive affiliation, but also a vehicle for self-righteousness and disparagement of “the other”, to the point of portraying the opponent – in the words of the historian Richard Hafstadter – as “a perfect picture of malice”.

The image I find useful in explaining the behavior of particular identities for good or bad is that of a spiral. These different components of identity are like circles within circles. When they feel secure within the wider context in which they find themselves, then they can affirm, open up and contribute to the broader context; families engaging other families; communities working together with other communities; nations contributing to the commonweal of nations; and religions affirming all human dignity within the family of humankind. However, when these components of human identity do not feel comfortable in the broader context, they cut themselves off from the wider context, isolate themselves and invariably denigrate the other/s, compounding the sense of alienation.

Because Religion is bound up with identity, it plays a key role in nurturing identity when threatened (or perceived as such.) However in contexts of alienation and conflict, precisely because they are so inextricably bound up with the identities involved, religions not only provide support and succor; all too often they also tend to become part and parcel of that aforementioned self-righteousness and denigration of the other, exacerbating the conflict and alienation, betraying their most sublime universal values.

To enable Religions to be what we all here would agree they should be - elixirs of life for all ; the sources of alienation that make them even into death potions , need to be addressed.

Of course, when we are confronted with the violent abuse of religion as with all threatening violence, we have to take necessary steps for self-defense; and most of us would tend to agree that sometimes there is no recourse in the short term but to paradoxically use violence to stem violence. But our religions all teach that this is not good enough. “Who is the true hero” ask our sages “he who makes his enemy into a friend” they declare.

This certainly requires efforts to drain the swamps of alienation in which the anopheles of conflict breeds - economic and political marginalization and so on. However, there is more to the source of alienation that threatens societies today than just these tangible factors. The psychology of rejection is arguably the most potent of all the sources of alienation. Indeed it is not possible to begin to understand the hostility that exists among certain extremist militant violent groups that find their succor and inspiration in religion, if one ignores the power of this alienation, this sense of disparagement and humiliation.

It is here that interfaith relations in particular can play such an important role. Reaching out to the other in the Abrahamic spirit of hospitality can play a critically valuable role in giving communities and their members a sense that they are welcome and respected by other communities and help them contribute to the wider circle of identity, rather than be alienated from it.

Our Traditions present Abraham’s tent as a manifestation of this spirit, with its tent flaps raised so that sojourners from all four corners could find hospitality and welcome there.

Genesis Chapter 18 opens describing Abraham sitting at the entrance to his tent “and he lifted up his eyes and saw and behold three men were standing in front of him; and he saw and ran towards them”... Abraham greets them and offers them hospitality. No questions as to their identity, their origins, their beliefs etc. In the course of this encounter he discovers that they are Divine messengers, as he is promised the wondrous birth of a son a year later.

However two of the three visitors still have work to do, and the next chapter opens with the words “and the two angels came to Sodom”. Asks one of the Hassidic masters, why does the text refer to the visitors only as “men” regarding the loving and righteous Abraham; but concerning Sodom, of all places, they are referred to as “angels” ! And he answered, because Abraham didn’t *need* to be told that they were angels, because Abraham saw the angel in every human being.

That is the ultimate ideal of hospitality, when we can see the Divine presence in each and every person, all created in the Divine Image and receive them accordingly. This is the critical role of Religion in itself; and in a particular way, of interfaith relations that express genuine respect and even celebration of the other’s diversity.

This has been the remarkable journey in terms of Catholic-Jewish relations – indeed as part and parcel of Christian-Jewish reconciliation as a whole – over the last fifty years since the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*. A people seen before then overwhelmingly as guilty of the most heinous of crimes and thus rejected and condemned by God to wander until the end of times – even as being in league with the Devil – is now seen in the words of Saint John Paul II as “the dearly beloved elder brother of the Church of the original Covenant never broken and never to be broken” and with whom Christianity has a relationship that is essential and intrinsic to its very being.

There is no transformation comparable in human history. And aside from its own significance, *Nostra Aetate* serves as a global inspiration; for if such a poisoned chronic relationship can be transformed in to one that is so good today with Popes demonstrating that spirit of “hospitality” to the Jewish community being known and seen as true friends; then surely there is no relationship no matter how vitiated, that cannot be transformed into a healthy and respectful one.

Naturally and especially as an Israeli I have in mind in particular the relationship between Arab and Jew and perhaps even more so with the Muslim world at large and Arab Muslim society foremost.

As you know, there have been and continue to be remarkable initiatives even in these regards even dark times; and many who have constituted the Israeli representation within the ICCJ have played a notable and inspiring role in this regard.

The pervading and perhaps even worsening mutual alienation among the peoples of the Holy Land make such endeavor even more important than ever – if for no other reason than the imperative need to testify to what the relationships *should* be and the role religion *should* play.

Indeed, the role of 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 many contexts of conflict), to be the voice of the non-establishment religious visionaries and activists.

The fact that most institutional religion in our part of the world is so inextricably bound up with the power structures, makes it very rare for a truly prophetic voice to emerge from the institutional religious leadership of either of these communities. However all this does not make official religious institutions irrelevant to the conflict and attempts to resolve it – on the contrary. Such institutions are still symbolic representative bodies of the identities involved – both for worse and potentially for the better.

Precisely because religion is 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 tendency is comprehensible but terribly misguided, as it fails to address these most deep-seated dimensions of the communal identities involved and actually undermines the capacities of positive political initiatives to succeed.

Personally, I do not believe that the Middle East context nor the character of institutional religious leadership in the region will allow for Religion to spearhead any initiative to bring about peace and reconciliation. However, I do agree that it is very questionable whether peace and reconciliation can ever come about **without** the support of Religion and of interreligious co-operation, precisely for the reasons mentioned earlier. Because conflicts deal with psychological intangibles and not only territorial and jurisdictional matters; and because conflicts tend to involve identities which are generally both tied up with and divided by confessional or denominational loyalties; demonstrations of interreligious respect or at least interreligious coexistence, become critical vehicles for counteracting the mutual demonization and zero sum mentality nurtured by the conflict.

However in highly politicized contexts where religion is so frequently negatively instrumentalized, constructive religious leadership and interreligious engagement require the facilitation of political leadership to highlight them, providing visibility and impact. Indeed, political failure to do so just plays into the hands of extremists and further dangerously exacerbates conflict.

If politicians fail to understand the potentially constructive role of religion; there is often a lack of political practicality on the part of religious leaders. Pope Francis demonstrated vision and courage in the remarkable prayer meeting he convened in the Vatican gardens together with Shimon Peres and Mahmoud Abbas. However the manner in which this was done did not demonstrate good political sense. To take such an initiative without even keeping the current Israeli government “in the loop”, was bound to make it a one-time event, albeit a testimony of note, but with little or no impact on the conflict itself.

Yet I fervently hope that Pope Francis will pursue that initiative further bringing institutional religious leadership together with those who do have the political authority and capacity to make a difference; perhaps even regionally. And there are further signs and perhaps opportunities in this regard with more interfaith initiatives coming from the Arab Muslim world than ever before. Regardless of the variety of motives behind such initiatives, they provide contexts for religious and interreligious hospitality which is at the heart of the role that religion should play in a conflicted world – to combat all that without and within it that is part of *sam hamavet*, the forces of death; and to be true to its most noble métier, to be *sam hachayim*, a source of revitalization and blessing for all.

