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Panelists says religion abused for terror in isolated societies

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WASHINGTON (CNS) -- Religion is easily abused as a vehicle for terror, which flourishes because of a society's isolation and alienation, said the international director of interreligious affairs for the American Jewish Committee.

"Religion is bound up with a sense of identity," and it seeks to give meaning to alienated people, who "insulate themselves" from society, said Rabbi David Rosen, a panelist at a 2006 International Prayer for Peace discussion, "Religions Facing Terrorism," at Georgetown University in Washington. The April 27 discussion was part of the two-day international peace meeting sponsored by the Washington Archdiocese, Georgetown University, The Catholic University of America and the Rome-based Community of Sant'Egidio.

Rabbi Rosen, who called terrorism a complex and modern "threat against civilization," said "religion tends to nurture that identity that feels itself under siege." He said it can manifest isolation and delineate a barrier between those who are with God and those who are godless.

The universal aspects of religion -- love, justice, respect for the wider community and true hospitality -- need to be emphasized to quench terrorism, the rabbi said, adding that to do this "profound inner security and even social security" are required.

Archbishop Celestino Migliore, Vatican nuncio to the United Nations, said religion is a "vitamin to the poor ... and to those otherwise who would be left behind."

Archbishop Migliore suggested community and universal fidelity as tools against terrorism. The archbishop said religious organizations, which have the ability and power, should work together for peace.

Archbishop Migliore told the audience of about 70 members that religion is no longer "taboo at the U.N." and that the United Nations is dealing with religion and terrorism.

"All of a sudden, religion has erupted" and is on the U.N. radar screen, he said. "We (religious leaders and organizations) must take hold of this attention."

Another panelist, Maryann Cusimano Love, associate professor of international politics at Catholic University, said morality cannot be ignored in the fight against terrorism.

"We are challenged to view the headlines through the eyes of faith," she said.

Cusimano Love said despite suggestions to limit morality "against an enemy fighting a dirty war ... moral codes are not a hindrance, but a help" because they provide legitimacy and credibility.

"Abandoning morality is bad politics," Cusimano Love said.

She said that terrorists, who battle for minds and use terrorism because of inferior resources in comparison to states, seek to "capitalize on the overreaction of states."

"Military responses (to terrorism) are more difficult and less effective," she said, adding that faith groups can "radically alter the political space" and reframe issues to be "deeply held moral ideas."

Cusimano Love, who calls this strategy "resurrection politics," said it has worked before amid "dead-on-arrival" governments who are slow to react to important issues. Resurrection politics has worked in the fight for effective HIV/AIDS policies and Third World debt relief, she said.

Bishop Anthony Lobo of Islamabad-Rawalpindi, Pakistan, gave examples of how Christians and Muslims have worked together in Pakistan against natural disasters, "religious apartheid" and legislation that would stifle religious freedom.

"When religions together face the common enemy, then the untold power and passion that comes from faith" can unite, Bishop Lobo said.