

Religion – A Way to Peace | april 2009

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Daniel Rossing, Director

Jerusalem Center for Jewish-Christian Relations (JCJCR)

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I basically agree with the argument of the eminent Swiss theologian Hans Kung that there can be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions and that there can be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions. Nowhere would this seem to be more true than in the case of Israel/the Holy Land/Palestine, where influential segments of the population are informed and inspired by deeply-held religious convictions, and where the negative fallout from centuries of religious competition and conflicts between Jews, Christians and Muslims still casts a long shadow over the land and has yet to be deactivated and dispersed through constructive inter-religious dialogues, which are an essential, but often neglected, component of any process of peace building in the Holy Land.

In discussing the topic of “Religion – A Way to Peace,” I want to make my observations more concrete by relating primarily to the particular context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the midst of which I live and work. My remarks in this session are an abbreviated and adapted form of a lecture which I first delivered in the summer of 2006 at a conference of the Society for Christian Humanism and Social Outlook held in Ljungskile, a Swedish version of which appeared in the 2006 Yearbook of the Society.

One of the characteristics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is that the two peoples have developed mutually exclusive narratives which at many points appear to completely contradict one another. Each side tends to see itself principally as an innocent victim and the other as an evil aggressor. The gap between the two accounts of the conflict tends to widen into a chasm when the sides tell their respective tales of woe to foreign audiences, who in turn have become increasingly polarized in their assessment of the conflict and in their solidarity with the suffering of one side or the other. “Objective” analysis of the causes and nature of the conflict and impartial proposals for how to manage or resolve it are rare. I am fully conscious of my own subjectivity as I briefly attempt to contextualize the conflict and reflect on how to bring religious healing and reconciliation to the lives of Jews, Christians and Muslims in Israel/Palestine .

The “homeland” over which the two peoples are fighting is at the same time the “holy land” of the three faith communities involved – Jews, Christians and Muslims. People, faith and land are linked in ways that are difficult to disentangle. The resulting complex mixtures of ethnicity, nationality and religion often puzzle outside observers, and frustrate attempts to describe the core of our conflict as essentially ethnic, strictly political or fundamentally religious.

I believe that one of the reasons for the failure of the Oslo process, as well as of the Geneva Accord, is that they were secular peace plans imposed by secular politicians on a Holy Land where religion and religious identity are always just below the surface. From the beginning, I noted the dangerous defect inherent in a peace process in which there was virtually no input from religious personalities, even from the religious peace camp, nor any attempt to enlist the public support of religious leaders. This serious flaw in the Oslo process became most apparent at Camp David in the summer of 2000 when secular politicians on both sides were dissecting the four quarters of the heart of Jerusalem and dividing up the holy places of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, once again with virtually no input or participation of the religious leaders of the various faith communities. In the end, by failing to address core issues of faith and identity, secular negotiators allowed radical, extremist religious forces to dominate this crucial area.

One of the admirable exceptions to the general tendency to totally separate the political and religious realms was the Alexandria Declaration of January 2002, an initiative of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the result of a process in which Rabbi Michael Melchior, who was originally invited to this conference, played a prominent role. For those of you who wish to read it, I have copies of the document signed on that occasion by prominent Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious leaders from Israel-Palestine.

In Israel, much of the extensive work being done in the field of Jewish-Arab co-existence is premised on the assumption that tolerance and friendly relations can be achieved only if religion is kept at a distance. On the other hand, forums and frameworks for interfaith dialogue often follow the principle that politics should be banned from the discussions in order to achieve understanding between the various faith communities. The Jerusalem Center for Jewish-Christian Relations (JCJCR) is one of the few organizations that attempts to simultaneously address both religious and political aspects of relations. Thus, for example, we are keenly aware, that although Israeli Jews and Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land share the same Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), the fact that their national identities are locked in conflict leads them to read the Bible in the land of the Bible in different, and at times seemingly contradictory, ways.

We are working in a context in which memories of the past and visions of the future play a prominent role in shaping the perceptions and firing the passions of Israelis and Palestinians. What each group in the Holy Land chooses to remember from centuries past and the particular milestones that it commemorates is what makes the group distinct and different. This produces a fascinating mosaic composed of concurrent centuries, but it also impairs our ability to see the other in the here and now. Our two nations are deeply traumatized by history and are currently locked in a mutually reinforcing pattern of demonization, with each side doing its best to fuel the fears of the other. Jews need to acknowledge that the Palestinians are not Nazis or a modern-day Amalek or simply the latest in a long list of groups that have risen in each generation to destroy us. Palestinians need to recognize that Israeli Jews are not a reincarnation of the Crusades and Zionism is not simply a form of Western colonialism.

Our search for a better future ironically is sometimes confounded also by the ways in

which our respective visions of the future or the world to come penetrate the present. Our messianic hopes and dreams can of course be a vital source of strength and inspiration, which help us see beyond walls of fear, desperation and despair. But our visions of the future can also invade the present in the form of dangerous notions of realized eschatology and a blurring of the border between the present and a messianic future or a world to come. Such thinking easily produces lethal mixtures of nationalism and messianism, in which politics are sanctified and innocents are slaughtered in the name of God. We need to place borders around aspects of our memory and our visions of the future so that we can live in peace and harmony in the present.

We must be attentive to the respective roles of verbal and non-verbal communication. Words and the exchange of words are the principle means of reconciliation and peacemaking in Western culture and western interfaith dialogue. In this regard, we must recall that when Jews, Christians and Muslims, or Israelis and Palestinians, meet in the Holy Land, they do not share a common native tongue. Furthermore, as Marc Gopin notes in his book *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East*, a fixation on the exchange of words “frustrates and disempowers those who engage in reconciliation through gestures, symbols, emotions, and shared work.” More than three decades of working with the two peoples and three faiths in the Holy Land has taught me the profound power of non-verbal gestures and the importance of symbols, and particularly of religious symbols, in any attempt to build relations based on respect for and sensitivity to the other and the other’s culture and religion.

Just as I noted in the second session the potential negative impact of the fundamental similarities between Jews, Christians and Muslims, so also I observe a similar phenomenon in the relations between Israelis and Palestinians, who are also very similar in significant ways. As I previously pointed out, in a situation in which the other is neither “other” nor “brother,” relations tend to be highly charged and often hatred for the “almost the same” is a matter of self-preservation. Because we appear to be so similar, we need borders within which we can each freely and responsibly celebrate and share the differences that make each of us unique. There is no being, whether individual or communal, without relationship and there can be no relationship without borders.

On the political level, I support a two-state arrangement for Israelis and Palestinians, with agreed borders that will make it possible for us to live as good neighbors, respecting the integrity of each other’s historical, cultural and religious inheritance. In the meantime, it is obvious that borders – both physical and psychological – are being dictated largely by the ocean of fear, anger and hatred in which we are all drowning. The separation wall or security fence is a tragic development reflecting despair, desperation and the total breakdown in relationship between Israelis and Palestinians.

How might we reduce the level of fear and hopelessness and begin building a relationship founded on trust and inspired by the hope of a radically different, mutually beneficial future? Obviously we need to agree on an equitable territorial compromise, guarantee full human rights for all individuals, provide for the communal needs of religious, cultural and ethnic groups, and effectively ensure security for both nations. But any peace agreement

will be fragile unless it is nourished and sustained by a fundamental transformation of outlooks and attitudes. Two-dimensional political space with maps and borders and separation must be transformed by a third religious dimension of responsibility, reconciliation and relationship, of holiness, harmony and wholeness. Then borders will no longer be barriers but a place “between,” a threshold of meeting where personal and communal identity, and the conflict itself, can be transformed through the encounter with the Other.

Each of the Abrahamic traditions affirms the importance of self-examination, the value of all human beings, and the need to offer hospitality and mercy to the other. Jews, Christians and Muslims must examine the ways in which we have allowed politics and politicians to co-opt religion in their service, leaving us with the curse of politicized religion and religiously sanctioned politics. We must scrutinize the ways in which religion, as well as our respective experiences as victims, have been used, or abused, as an excuse or even a justification for policies or actions that demonize or terrorize the Other.

The Middle East correspondent of a major broadcasting corporation was once asked how he is psychologically and emotionally able to report time after time from the scene of deadly suicide bombs. He responded that the key is never to look at the faces of the dead and wounded. Israelis and Palestinians long ago stopped looking one another in the face, stopped seeing the agony in the face of the other. Our religious traditions all emphasize that each individual is created in the image of God and thus they can help us to once again look into the face of the other and sincerely say, as Jacob did to Esau, “for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God” (Genesis 33:10).

Finally, all three Abrahamic traditions emphasize the need to sacrifice and to be merciful, even – and perhaps especially – in the midst of our suffering. In concluding these opening remarks in this third session, I wish to again refer to the example of Father Abraham to which I referred in my opening remarks in the first session. After concluding his own special covenant with God (Genesis 17), he did not withdraw from the broad open spaces of humanity into the seclusion, security and solace of his tent to recover from his pain. Rather immediately after his circumcision at age 99, he sat in the door of his tent in the heat of the day, his mind and heart open to receive and host others, without regard for whether they share in his particular covenant. His reward was offspring – a future. To express the same idea through imagery drawn from the experience of women, Israelis and Palestinians seem to be faced with the ultimate challenge of both coping with their own labor pains and, and at the same time, serving as a merciful midwife to a neighbor who is also in labor.

In interfaith circles in Israel-Palestine, people often draw a distinction between peacemaking and peace building. The former is the work of politicians and lawyers and it involves drafting pieces of papers and signing agreements that are then either faithfully observed or violated in the midst of mutual accusations that the other side is failing to keep its side of the bargain. Peace building on the other hand is the task of clergy, educators, psychologists and social workers and it involves long-term religious and educational endeavors on all levels of society to change the hearts and minds of people in ways that convince them of the benefits of peace for all parties.

The First Alexandria Declaration of the Religious Leaders of the Holy Land
Alexandria, 21 January 2002

In the name of God who is Almighty, Merciful and Compassionate, we, who have gathered as religious leaders from the Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities, pray for true peace in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, and declare our commitment to ending the violence and bloodshed that denies the right of life and dignity.

According to our faith traditions, killing innocents in the name of God is a desecration of His Holy Name, and defames religion in the world. The violence in the Holy Land is an evil which must be opposed by all people of good faith. We seek to live together as neighbors respecting the integrity of each other's historical and religious inheritance. We call upon all to oppose incitement, hatred and misrepresentation of the other.

1. The Holy Land is holy to all three of our faiths. Therefore, followers of the divine religions must respect its sanctity, and bloodshed must not be allowed to pollute it. The sanctity and integrity of the holy places must be preserved, and freedom of religious worship must be ensured for all.
2. Palestinians and Israelis must respect the divinely ordained purposes of the Creator by whose grace they live in the same land that is called holy.
3. We call on the political leaders of both peoples to work for a just, secure and durable solution in the spirit of the words of the Almighty and the Prophets.
4. As a first step now, we call for a religiously sanctioned cease-fire, respected and observed on all sides, and for the implementation of the Mitchell and Tenet recommendations, including the lifting of restrictions and return to negotiations.
5. We seek to help create an atmosphere where present and future generations will co-exist with mutual respect and trust in the other. We call on all to refrain from incitement and demonization, and to educate our future generations accordingly.
6. As religious leaders, we pledge ourselves to continue a joint quest for a just peace that leads to reconciliation in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, for the common good of all our peoples.
7. We announce the establishment of a permanent joint committee to carry out the recommendations of this declaration, and to engage with our respective political leadership accordingly.

Host & Chair

His Eminence Sheikh Mohammed Sayed Tantawi, Grand Mufti of the Al-Azhar & His Grace the then-Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. George Carey.

Signatories

- The Shephardi Chief, Rabbi Bakshi Doron;
- The Deputy Foreign Minister of Israel, Rabbi Michael Melchior;
- The Rabbi of Tekoa, Rabbi Menachem Fromen;
- Rabbi David Rosen, President of the World Conference on Religion and Peace;
- The Rabbi of Savyon, Rabbi David Brodman;
- Rabbi Yitzak Ralbag, Rabbi of Maalot Dafna;
- Chief Justice of the Sharia Courts, Sheikh Taisir Tamimi;
- Minister of State for the Palestinian Authority, Sheikh Tal El Sider;
- Mufti of the (Palestinian) Armed Forces, Sheikh Abdusalam Abu Schkedem;
- The Mufti of Bethlehem, Sheikh Taweel;
- Representative of the Greek Patriarch, Archbishop Aristarchos;
- The Latin Patriarch, His Beatitude Michel Sabbah;
- The Melkite Archbishop, Archbishop Boutros Mualem;
- Representative of the Armenian Patriarch, Bishop Arist Shrivinian and The Bishop of Jerusalem, The Right Reverend Riah Abu El Assal. ///