The 10th Annual Templeton Lecture on Religion and World Affairs

RELIGION, IDENTITY AND MIDEAST PEACE

by Rabbi David Rosen

David Rosen is the Director of Inter-religious Affairs for the American Jewish Committee in Jerusalem. He is the former Chief Rabbi of Ireland.

It is true that most conflicts that are portrayed as religious conflicts are not in essence anything of the sort. Whether between Hindus and Muslims in Kashmir, Buddhists and Hindus in Sri Lanka, Christians and Muslims in Nigeria or Indonesia, Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, or between Muslims and Jews in the Middle East, these conflicts are not at all religious or theological in origin! They are all territorial conflicts in which ethnic and religious differences are exploited and manipulated, often mercilessly.

However this fact still begs the question. Why and how is it that religion is so easily exploited and abused? Why is it that in many contexts of conflict in our world, religion appears to be more part of the problem than the solution? The answer, I believe, is to a great extent implicit in the aforementioned point itself — namely, 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 well-being 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 those who have lost the traditional compasses of orientation.

In the relationship between religion and identity, the components or circles within circles 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 or perceive ourselves.

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. Indeed because religion is so inextricably bound up with identity, religion itself acquires far greater prominence in times of threat and conflict, nurturing and strengthening the identity that senses itself as threatened, in opposition to that which is perceived as threatening it. We might note in this regard the role of the ancient Hebrew prophets in relation to the people when in exile. Then they do not challenge their lack of moral responsiveness and ethical outreach -- that they do when the people are secure. In times of insecurity, they see their role to protect and enhance the identity that is under threat.

However, the character that religion assumes under such circumstances is often not just one of nurturing, but often one of such self-preoccupation and paradoxically even one of self-righteousness, that disregards "the other" who is perceived as not part of one's identity group and even demonizes that "other" who is perceived as hostile, often portraying the latter -- in the words of the historian Richard Hofstadter -- as "a perfect picture of malice."

The image I find useful in explaining the behaviour of particular identities for good or bad is that of a spiral. These different components of identity, as I mentioned before, are circles within circles. When they feel secure within the wider context in which they find themselves, then they can open up and affirm the broader context; families respecting other families; communities respecting other communities; nations respecting other nations; and religions affirming the commonality within the family of nations or humankind. However, when these components of human identity do not feel comfortable in the broader context, they isolate themselves, cut themselves off from one another and generally compound the sense of alienation.

In the Middle East this phenomenon is especially intense. Everybody in our part of the world feels vulnerable and threatened; it is just that different groups see themselves and others in different paradigms! Therefore it is very difficult within such a context to be able to open to the other and affirm our common humanity in the recognition and the importance of the fact not only that every human being is created in the image of the Divine, but that our religions -- all our religions -- affirm the value of peace as an ideal for human society and see violence and war as being undesirable -- perhaps a necessity in cases, but certainly not as an ideal.

Moreover, where religion does not provide a prophetic challenge to political authority, but is both caught up as part of the political reality and even subordinate and subject to political authority as it is in the Middle East, institutional religion tends to be more part of the problem than part of the solution. The role of the 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 most contexts of conflict, to be the voice of the non-establishment religious visionaries and activists.

Christianity has perhaps been a more constructive voice within this context, but there is the rub: for Christianity in the Middle East is characterized precisely by the fact that it is not linked to any political power base. However, most institutional religion in our part of the world is so inextricably bound up with the power structures -- with the heads of the respective Jewish and Muslim communities actually appointed by the political authorities -- that it is very rare for a truly prophetic voice to emerge from the institutional religious leadership of either the Jewish or Muslim communities. And even within the local Christian communities there is also a tendency to be hamstrung by the exigencies of the political realities that impose very significant restrictions and pressures upon the role of leadership within such a context.

Because religion is therefore 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 the most deep-seated dimensions of the communal identities involved and actually undermines the capacities of positive political initiatives to succeed. Indeed, I believe this was a significant factor in the failure of the Oslo Process. Let me make the point more graphically. On the lawn of the White House when the famous handshake took place in September 1992, one saw no visible personality representing religious leadership either of the Jewish community or of the Muslim community in the Holy Land supporting the desire to find a way out of the regional conflict. The message was clear: religion is something to be kept out of the process. It is not an exaggeration to say that this attitude compounded a sense of alienation on the part of the most fervently religious elements within both communities who did their best to violently undermine that process (not that I am suggesting any equivalence here!).

Furthermore, during the last five years, not only have we witnessed terrible violence in the Holy Land, but we also have seen a most worrying religious manipulation of a territorial conflict, using religious symbols and arguments to poison minds and justify terrible carnage.

Undoubtedly, the global terrorist abuse of religion has significantly contributed to a dawning realization in the world and in relation to the Middle East in particular that not only is religion, as Doug Johnston has described it, "the missing dimension of statecraft," but that, in fact, if one does not engage religious institutions that reflect the most profound identities of the peoples concerned to support positive political processes, then inevitably one is playing into the hands of those hostile to them. The real way to overcome the extremists is to strengthen the hands of the moderates. The effective way to marginalize the political abuse of religion is to demonstrate its constructive political use to embrace the other while respecting the differences that make us who we are.

It was in this light, amidst the worst violence in recent years in the Holy Land, that a remarkable gathering took place three years ago in Alexandria, Egypt, bringing religious leaders of the Three Faith communities together for the first time ever in human history, to lend the voices of their respective traditions to an end to violence and to promoting peace and reconciliation. But precisely because of the fear and insecurity that separates our communities in conflict, it required a third party to bring this about. And the person to do so was the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord George Carey. Providentially, Canterbury had an institutional relationship with Al Azhar in Cairo, the fountainhead of Islamic learning in the Arab world, indeed in the Muslim world at large, and the Grand Imam of Al Azhar, Sheikh Tantawi, agreed to host the meeting. This was crucial in facilitating the success of this initiative. For while the Chief Rabbis of Israel do not represent all religious Jews in Israel, let alone in the world, nevertheless no one in world Jewry would object to their representing Judaism for the purpose of advancing interreligious reconciliation. Similarly, while the Patriarchs of Jerusalem do not represent the whole of Christendom, their role as representatives of Christianity in an effort to promote reconciliation in the Middle East would certainly be affirmed by the Christian world at large. But, in the Islamic context, the religious leadership within Palestinian society does not have the standing throughout the Muslim world to ensure that its voice would be heard and respected as representing Islam. Thus, the need to have this major institution of Islamic learning support this process was of critical importance. In addition, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak gave the green light to Sheikh Tantawi to host the gathering, and arranged for all the participants to subsequently meet with him at his palace in Cairo for a press conference. This was because President Mubarak, like other political leaders, now had an interest, especially after September 11, 2001, in being seen to be on the side of constructive religious resolution of conflict rather than to be avoiding it. And not only President Mubarak, but of course Prime Minister Sharon, and Chairman Arafat also had an interest in such. The amazing thing was that they all lent their support to this initiative despite the violence that was going on at the time.

As mentioned, this summit was indeed an historic event, as never before had heads of the different three faith communities in the Holy Land ever come together in one place. The participants included four leading Sheikhs from the establishment structure of the Palestinian authority, including the head of the Shaaria Courts, their Supreme Islamic Juridicial Authority; five prominent Israeli rabbis, including the Sephardic Chief Rabbi; and all Patriarchs were represented, the Latin Patriarch attending in person. After much discussion we were able to agree on a text of a declaration that condemned the violent abuse of religion, suicidal homicides, and all actions that are oppressive and destructive of human life and dignity. The declaration also called on political leaders to eschew violence and return to the negotiating table and to recognize the importance of religion as a force of reconciliation; and it called for respect for the rights of both Israeli and Palestinian peoples.

Notwithstanding the ongoing violence, this was a document of great significance. While the symbolic significance of this summit and its declaration in itself should not be minimized, a number of important developments followed. To begin with, it initiated a process of real communication between the religious leaders who had previously had no ongoing contact between them. The outcome has been the establishment of a Council of the Religious Leadership Institutions of the Holy Land involving the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, the Shaaria Courts of Palestine and all the recognized Churches of the Holy Land.

This body declares its purpose not only to facilitate ongoing communication between the religious leadership, but also to engage respective political leadership in the pursuit of peace and reconciliation.

The Alexandria summit also led to the establishment of centers for the promotion of religious teaching on peace and reconciliation, in Gaza, Kafr Kassem and Jerusalem. One might also argue that had it not been for the Alexandria initiative, the historic World Congress of Imams and Rabbis for peace that took place this year in Brussels under the patronage of the Kings of Morocco and Belgium, would not have happened. This led to the formation of an executive and administrative structure to facilitate such ongoing dialogue and conversation and the second congress is scheduled to take place next March in Seville at the Center for the Three Cultures of the Mediterranean.

Above all, however, the Alexandria initiative has given both religious institutions in the Holy Land and beyond, a sense that they can and must play an active role in conflict resolution and has increased an understanding of this necessity among political leadership as well.

The potential in this regard is enormous and I would suggest that an urgent focus needs to be Jerusalem and the Holy sites.

It has been popular past political wisdom that Jerusalem is an issue that needs to be left until the end of a peace process. However, the "religionization" of the Middle East conflict to which I referred earlier -- not least of all reflected in the Palestinian designation of the last round of conflict as the Al Aksa Intifada -- has turned this "wisdom" on its head.

This negative use of religion reflecting and exploiting an atmosphere of insecurity and mistrust, has led to a perception within the Muslim World that Muslim Holy sites in Jerusalem are somehow under threat. At the same time, Jews around the world and not only in Israel, are horrified by what they perceive as the overwhelming denial on the part of Muslims of any historic attachment of the Jewish people to Jerusalem at all, let alone to its holy sites. And the Christian communities are caught between the hammer and the anvil.

Achieving an accord of the three religious communities on Jerusalem that would affirm respect for each one's attachments and sites, and adjuring against any threat in word or deed to these, would be of enormous psychological value. It would also be of great assistance for any political process it there is a will for such.

A serious difficulty however lies -- as I have already indicated -- in the fact that Palestinian Muslim leadership cannot speak on behalf of the Muslim world. Accordingly, any kind of interreligious accord has to involve the wider Arab Muslim world at least. There are five key "players" in this regard. In addition to the Palestinians, there is Jordan, which still has a special role in relation to the Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem; the Saudis, who see themselves as the Guardians of all the key Muslim holy sites; Egypt, which sees itself as the leader of the Arab world and is the seat of the most important Muslim institute of religious learning, Al Azhar; and Morocco, whose King chairs the Jerusalem Committee of the OIC.

Efforts at bringing all these components together to achieve an accord on Jerusalem and the holy sites are now underway and, if they succeed, could be of enormous value.

As I have indicated, institutional religion cannot in itself spearhead a political peace process in the Middle East. However, it is an essential partner in providing the psycho-spiritual glue without which no peace process will hold together.

Simply stated, if we do not want religion to be part of the problem, it has to be part of the solution — and where else more so than in the land that is holy and so significant for all three faiths, and where any accord between the local communities will have enormous ramifications not only for our region but indeed for the world as a whole.

The Templeton Lecture on Religion and World Affairs