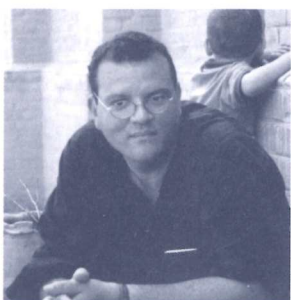


HOPE IN A VIOLENT WORLD: THE ALEXANDRIA PEACE PROCESS

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION AND VIOLENCE, BOTH AS A CAUSE AND A CURE, AS A MEANS OF BRINGING ABOUT RECONCILIATION, IS PROBABLY THE MOST IMPORTANT ISSUE FACING THE WORLD TODAY.

Despite its importance, it is a topic that is often avoided at inter-faith consultations, for fear of causing offence.

Today, in a world post the attack on the Twin Towers, we do not have the luxury of avoiding the real issue. During the first Gulf War, President George Bush Snr stated that we were at a defining moment in history. It was not; it was an important moment. The events of 11 September 2001 were a defining moment in history. It was an attack on the heart of Western democracy and power, pictures of which were seen in homes around the world. They were a defining moment because from this point on the foreign policy of the world's only super-power changed forever. Since this tragedy, the world has had to wake up to the fact that we live in the shadow of terrorism. We live in a world where there is an increasing divide between the West and the Islamic world.

The history of how Christianity, Islam and Judaism have related to each other is not good. Despite the nice stories that people are willing to recall, especially in the current climate, the record is deeply depressing. These days, much attention is on the issue of Islamic terrorism, but the Church also has a history of violence. For example, there were infamous crusades of the Teutonic Knights against the pagan Baltic States, and the Protestant millenarian crusades of the Taborites in Bohemia. Then there was the Spanish Inquisition that, it could be argued, was a form of state-sponsored terrorism, and the 2000 years of anti-Semitism that created the atmosphere where the Holocaust could take place in the heart of Christian Europe.

In the present day, there are nearly always major religious elements in the conflicts that mar our world. In Europe, Africa and Asia, in the Balkans, Nigeria, the Ivory Coast, the Sudan, Pakistan and Indonesia there have been conflicts that heighten the divide between Islam and Christianity. However, it is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – with its faltering peace process and continuing spiral of violence, tragedy and death – that clearly demonstrates the significant role of religions in the creation of conflict.

Although the conflict is not essentially a religious one, religion is regularly used to justify the nationalist claims and allegations of both communities. There is, therefore, an understandable desire to keep religion out of the conflict. "Since the dangers of nationalistic

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religion are considerable, many political analysts and theorists of 'Conflict Resolution' see religion in general as a negative factor in society. So they favour keeping religious personalities out of any peacemaking process.¹ But, Israel and Palestine are not like Western liberal societies: the cultures of both peoples are not conducive to a total separation of religion and state. They live in a land that the three monotheistic faiths call holy; but the holy name of God has been desecrated by killing and bloodshed. Ultimately, we must realise that conflict usually results from the abuse of power. Both religion and politics can use and abuse power, and often, when both are mixed, both can be corrupted.

The Oslo peace process was a secular peace plan imposed by secular leaders.² Despite a few years of relative peace, the process was a failure. The reasons for its destabilisation were multi-faceted and complicated. Was it the pressure from the Clinton plan to come to final status agreement too quickly, or the lack of support from the Arab world for Arafat to accept the Camp David offer? Was it Sharon's ill-fated visit to Haram Al Sharif, the Temple Mount, or the frustrations of the Palestinian community at the failure to really deal with issues that affected their daily lives? There was also the issue of the return of refugees, and the actions of the renegade Abayat clan in Beit Jallah. They occupied Christian homes and shot missiles over to the Jewish neighbourhood of Gilo. *All* of these issues undoubtedly destabilised the peace process.

More fundamentally, the peace process failed because it did not take seriously the religious dimensions of the conflict. Rabbi Michael Melchior stated: "In all inter-group or international conflicts, with collective identities at stake, the foundational stories are 'narratives', if told by one side, and 'myths', if told by the other. Social processes need to take identities into account, and for the majority on both sides religion plays a central role in identity formation. A peace process that neglected the clash of narratives and that failed to grant basic legitimacy to both of them would not succeed. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is a territorial dispute, not a religious or existential one. But there are religious issues and overtones involved. Sadly, for the people leading the peace process, religion is a closed book. By failing to address core issues of faith and identity, they have allowed radical totalitarian religious forces to dominate this crucial arena."

THE ALEXANDRIA DECLARATION AND BEYOND

In the autumn of 2000, soon after the beginning of the Intifada Al Aqsa, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs asked whether I would be prepared to help develop a religious track of the peace process, in the hope of making a positive contribution. This was something many Israelis and Palestinians had already been trying to achieve. The then Deputy Foreign Minister of Israel, Rabbi Michael Melchior, was appointed as the lead person from the Israeli side. Such a project needed the backing of Chairman Arafat. He clearly thought that it was a constructive idea, especially if the Archbishop of Canterbury could be involved. Chairman Arafat appointed Sheik Tal El Sider, an Imam and Minister within the Palestinian Authority, as the leader of the Palestinian delegation. Rabbi Michael Melchior and Sheik Tal El Sider proved to be a unique combination as they were both spiritual and political leaders who bridged the political–religious divide.

For several weeks, secret nocturnal meetings (between 10 pm and 3 am or 4 am) grappled with some of the most complex religious and political issues. The aim was to come up with a statement that could be agreed by all parties. Plans were made for a high-level meeting, which the Archbishop of Canterbury agreed to chair. The Grand Imam of the Al Azhar – the leading Sunni Islamic authority in the world at the time – added Islamic credibility to the process.

An historic declaration was to be the focus of a summit planned for early in 2001. At the heart of the deliberations was the idea of stopping the religious legitimisation of the violence in the Holy Land, to show a united front from Jewish, Islamic and Christian leaders, and call for a religiously sanctioned ceasefire.

The British and US governments gave their total support. More remarkable was the support from both the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority. Rabbi Michael Melchior, the Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister, and Sheik Tal El Sider, the Palestinian Minister of State, provided inspirational leadership.

The Archbishop of Canterbury and his team visited Israel on 20 January 2001. First, he met Yasser Arafat, Prime Minister Sharon and Shimon Peres. All the meetings were positive and there was much expectation. It was to be the first time in history that such a high-level meeting had taken place between Israeli and Palestinian religious and political leaders. In the delegation were the most senior Imams from Palestine, along with a Palestinian minister. Elyahu

NOTES

1. Yehezkal Landau, an Israeli peace activist, who goes on to state that, "in the case of Israel/Palestine, this doctrinaire stance risks forfeiting the positive contribution that religious peacemakers can make".
2. The Israeli–Palestinian Declaration of Principles (Oslo Accords) was signed in September 1993. The process was started in Madrid in 1991 and was effectively ended at the Taba Conference of January 2001.
3. Copies of the final declaration are posted on various sites on the Internet. For example, see www.anglicaniffcon.org/Alexandria-Declaration.htm.
4. For example, during the siege of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the Alexandria delegates were able to support the different complex aspects of the negotiations; and a siege at the Mukarta in Hebron was ended within two hours thanks to the intervention of Sheik Tal El who went to rectify the problem.

Religion has power and it is how this power is used that will determine if it can be a positive force towards reconciliation and conflict transformation.

► Bakshi-Doron (the Sephardi Chief Rabbi), the Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister and Rabbi Michael Melchior (the leader of Meimad) headed the Israeli delegation. The Patriarchs and heads of the churches joined them.

THE MEETING

The gathering in Alexandria did not start well. Instead of starting by signing the Declaration and then working on the implementation, the Palestinian delegation decided that it no longer agreed with the wording of the document that had been prepared. A process of revision began immediately. Some struggled with the amendment of the Declaration,³ but truly remarkable things were happening. Outside the deliberations the Rabbis were gathered around the Grand Imam of Al Azhar, and the Sheiks around the Chief Rabbi. An incredibly warm historic relationship was developing between these traditional enemies.

Within half an hour of receiving the final approval from both Prime Minister Sharon and Chairman Arafat there was a press conference revealing this historic agreement to the world. The Arab and Israeli media covered the story extensively, but some of the Western media, including the BBC, did not know that the meeting was about to take place.

THE FUTURE OF THE PROCESS

Developments since Alexandria are even more important than the document itself. Nobody involved was naïve enough to think the Alexandria Declaration would provide the solution to the crisis, and although the cycle of violence continues, the Alexandria process remains a significant channel of Israeli and Palestinian engagement.⁴ The international community now takes it seriously: they now realise that the religious dimension of the peace process is far more than just a concern for issues connected to holy sites and Jerusalem. It is about preventing the Prince of Death from eclipsing the Tree of Life.

As the Alexandria process continues to be assessed, new visions of how the monotheistic faiths can collectively be a force for reconciliation are needed. Yossi Halevi, an Israeli writer, recently said, "If the religions in this region cannot produce people who, in the nuclear era, are capable of offering a vision for saving humanity, then all three Abrahamic traditions have outlived their usefulness." Engagement must reach out beyond the Western liberal mentality so that a dialogue can be established with those of very differing and far more radical persuasion.

Both Rabbi Michael Melchior and Sheik Tal El Sider have been criticised for the position they have taken; yet both have remained resolute in this process. In a recent meeting in London, they both came under opposition from the Arab media. Taking Rabbi Melchior's hand, Sheik Tal El responded to the criticism: "Rabbi Melchior is my brother and I will hold his hand and walk this long and difficult road of reconciliation until we can build a better world for our people, where we will live together in Peace."

Sheik Tal El is a former leader of Hamas and a sign of real hope. He was caught up in violence, imprisoned, expelled, and left for days in the winter snow in Lebanon. Now he believes that peace is the only way. Sheik Tal El is also a reason for commitment to continue to work with those who as yet do not hold to the validity of the way of peace. Usually, they do not because they have only seen the pain and brokenness of their own community and have not been able to transcend to know the pain of the other.

The Alexandria process still has a very long way to go before the initial Declaration is fully implemented. However, a model and precedent has been set for religions to show corporately that religion can be a force for good as well as evil. Religion has power and it is how this power is used that will determine if it can be a positive force towards reconciliation and conflict transformation.

Religion also faces another major challenge in the way that renewal and reform movements in all the Abrahamic faiths no longer accept the authority of orthodox, traditional leaders, whether Chief Rabbis, Grand Imams or Archbishops. Therefore, it is also necessary to engage with those who may not appear orthodox within their own tradition. It is these groups who often support violent philosophies. It is imperative that serious research begins to address this particular issue.

The history is not good, the present is bleak but if we are prepared to be as radical in our quest for reconciliation as the extremists are in their quest for violence we can build a different future; one where the Abrahamic faiths will travel the long and difficult journey of reconciliation together, even if they do shout at each other along the way. ■