

An Inter-religious Council at the United Nations could help build a more sustainable world peace

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Fellow panelists (Imam Dr. Zijad Delic, Executive Director, Canadian Islamic Congress; Dr. M. Ahmed Qadri, Director, Research and Media, Islamic Educational and Cultural Research Centre, USA and Canada; Mrs. Joy Pople, Universal Peace Federation International), Ladies and gentlemen,

The plight of many faith communities across the world is the key reason why the UN needs an Inter-religious Council. See, for example, the problems of Muslims in Europe as outlined by Ambassador Omur Orhun, the personal representative of the Chairman-in-office of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) on combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims: http://www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2005/09/16461_en.pdf

Performance Deficits

Most governments have now committed themselves through international agreements to protect religious freedom. In reality, however, the gap between promise and performance remains large for believers in many lands who find that their right to religious freedom is more evident in its lack or non-existence. This is another reason to create such a Council. Aggrieved faith communities in any country, (for example: Shias in Saudi Arabia, all but Shias in Iran, Christians in China, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Vietnam, Cuba, North Korea and elsewhere) should be able to apply to such a council for redress without permission of their national governments.

Other persecuted religious minorities in any UN member country could bring grievances to the Council. Four of a host of available current examples:

- The Falun Gong exercise-meditation community across China (www.david-kilgour.com)
- The Ahmadis whose two mosques were attacked in Lahore last week
- The Malay Muslims in southern Thailand
- The clergy/members of churches in South Kivu attacked by rebel groups (LRA, FDLR et al).

Standing Together

The first half of the twentieth century saw slaughter, cruelty, enslavement and torture on a scale that the world had probably never before seen. Tens of millions of human beings died at the hands of totalitarian enemies of all religion, such as Hitler, Stalin and Mao. Much of the violence was aimed at women, men and children whose sole "failing" was practising a spiritual faith. The same pattern prevails today among many of the remaining authoritarian/totalitarian governments.

Belief in God nonetheless continued among most of the human family and is now growing strongly in many communities. A UN inter-religious council could help with many related issues across the world, including discrimination against atheists and agnostics.

Religion and Social Harmony

Religion is sometimes abused to justify crimes against people. Harvey Milk once argued: "More people have been slaughtered in the name of religion than any other single reason." Since WW2, more persons than perished in the Holocaust have died around the world in other genocides.

Using religion as a cover for politically-motivated violence is usually premised on the claim that one's own religion must be dominant. Religious extremists often deny the rights of others whose beliefs or non-beliefs are different from their own. The result is labelling which then isolates the group and makes it a potential target for persecution. This is offensive to the principles of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights; moreover, it is offensive to the basic foundation of all religions, which is love for all humanity.

The Qur'an, for example, declares that: "if anyone saves a person it will be as if he has saved the whole of humanity". In Hinduism, we are called to live "beyond the reach of I and mine"; in Buddhism, we are asked to "practise compassion." The Sikh scripture advises us that "God's bounties are common to all. It is we who have created divisions."

Religious freedom is about respecting others' rights to choose different beliefs. If we grant this to each other, harmony among religions will become reality. I'll attempt briefly now to deal with building harmony among the three Abrahamic religions.

Abrahamic Religions

One of the major causes of violence in the Middle East is the widespread view that Jews, Muslims and Christians do not worship the same God. This misunderstanding encourages members of the three to dehumanize and often to demonize followers of the others. When added to other regional issues, the result is often violence and mayhem, frequently involving children and mothers.

In reality, Muslims, Christians and Jews do worship the same God, albeit in different ways and with differing emphases. Each of the three believes that life has profound value and meaning. The widespread ignorance about each other is a continuing major obstacle to mutual respect and building harmony. All of us must work harder in the new century to eliminate this knowledge deficit. The Inter-religious council could help by developing an education campaign.

There is another important area of misunderstanding among all three religions: the large differences of viewpoints within each of them. No one has written about this more perceptively than Karen Armstrong in her book, *The Battle for God*, which examines why fundamentalism has grown in all three faiths. The Arab-Israeli conflict is one example she cites. It began as a secularist dispute on both sides, but today is seen through an almost exclusively faith prism by both. In the late 1970's, each of the three faiths saw fundamentalism among its followers take centre stage.

Islam

The *Battle for God* notes that in the 16th century Muslims constituted approximately one third of the world's population. Three new Muslim empires were founded in that century alone: the Ottoman, the Safavid and the Moghul, with all three providing a cultural renewal comparable to the Italian Renaissance.

According to Armstrong and many other commentators, fundamentalist Muslims around the world are today deeply concerned about two features of Western society:

1. the separation of religion from government/politics; and
2. the lack of Shariah law as they want their own communities to be governed by the laws of Isla.

Judaism

How many know that about 50,000 Spanish Jews were welcomed by the Muslim Ottoman Empire when they were expelled from Spain after 1492? Centuries later, notes Armstrong, reform Judaism, especially in the U.S. after 1870, was progressive, liberal and disposed to privatize faith. Many believers in traditional Judaism felt themselves besieged; some even refused to participate in secular education or to participate in modern communities. Many who led the movement to create a Jewish homeland in Palestine, she asserts, were in fact atheists, who failed to understand that the land they sought was occupied by 750,000 Palestinian Arabs, who were expelled from their homes in 1948. Religious Jews countered that secular nationalism in the Middle East or anywhere is usually a recipe for disaster by secular totalitarians.

Christianity

The rise of Christian fundamentalism, says Armstrong, parallels that of the two other religions, although I'll only mention two features she cites from the American experience.

The 1787 constitution of the United States does not mention God at all; the First Amendment formally separated religion from the state. By the middle of the 19th century, however, most Americans had become Christian. The American Evangelicals, who seek a "righteous empire" based on Godly, not Enlightenment, concepts, became increasingly influential in the early part of the 20th century.

As Armstrong puts it, fundamentalism in all three faiths "exists in a symbiotic relationship with an aggressive liberalism or secularism, and under attack, increasingly becomes more extreme, bitter and excessive." During the 1960's and the 1970's in the U.S., faced with such an ethos, Protestant fundamentalists grew more vocal. One of their major concerns was that the First Amendment was to protect religion from the state, not vice versa.

I'd argue that believers of all three religions, each holding that humankind is no mere molecular accident, can agree on a host of issues, including the unacceptable growing inequality of world incomes, the need to protect the natural environment, human dignity, and the necessity for peace and genuine harmony among all peoples and nation

Post September 11

The author's conclusion in *Battle for God* is that fundamentalists in all three religions have succeeded in rescuing their respective faiths from attempts to privatize or to suppress each of them. Fundamentalism is now part of the modern world, she concludes, and is here to stay.

Armstrong: "...the liberal myth that humanity is progressing to an ever more enlightened and tolerant state looks as fantastic as any of the other millennial myths we have considered in this book. Without the constraints of a higher mystical truth, reason can on occasion become demonic and count views that are as great, if not greater, than any of the atrocities perpetrated by fundamentalists."

Armstrong wrote her book before the events of September 11th, 2001, but some of the related points she makes still seem valid. First, liberals and fundamentalists in all three faiths must build bridges and attempt to avoid future confrontations. An Inter-religious Council at the United Nations could assist them by holding conferences, workshops etc designed to reduce tensions in these matters. Each side must try to understand what motivates the other. Fundamentalists must develop a more compassionate assessment of their opponents to be true to their religion's traditions. Secularists, says Armstrong, "must be more faithful to the benevolence, tolerance and respect for humanity which characterizes modern culture at its best, and address themselves more emphatically to the fears, anxieties, and needs which so many of their fundamentalist neighbours experience and which no society can safely ignore."

Conclusion

Finally, a quote from a speech by His Highness, the Aga Khan, spiritual leader to 15 million Ismaili Muslims worldwide and who only last week was made Canada's latest honorary citizen: "In the troubled times in which we live, it is important to remember, and honour, a vision of a pluralistic society. Tolerance, openness and understanding towards other people's cultures, social structures, values and faiths are now essential to the very survival of an interdependent world. Pluralism is no longer simply an asset or a prerequisite for progress and development; it is vital to our existence. Never perhaps more so than at the present time, must we renew with vigour our creative engagement in revitalizing shared heritage through collaborative ventures such as the project we are inaugurating today."

On the recent events near Gaza, if a U.N. Inter-religious Council had been in place, might it have diffused the situation and perhaps prevented the loss of lives? Probably not, but the tragedy does appear at one level to underline again the religious-political underpinning of many world conflicts today. A well-functioning Council could address this reality wherever there is a need, perhaps setting in place mechanisms to keep conflicts from escalating to the Gaza level. More generally, it could improve the level of inter-religious dialogue across the world.

In short, for all these reasons, I support the creation of a UN Inter-religious Council, with a ten-year mandate to prove its worth.

Thank you