

PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Contribution of Religion to Peace in the Middle East

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I've been told very often that the key role of religious leaders is to offer hope to their followers. I was offered hope earlier when I was told I was third speaker. Many of you may have had hope, especially those of you who have to leave early, if you thought you could get away early without hearing what I have to say. Unfortunately we are all about to hear a speech, which was going to be worked on over the next hour or so. I'm really in a difficult position because we have well-respected, international travellers as other speakers. I do not claim to be somebody with their background or history but I hope I am able to contribute something to the discussion today.

Before I begin, I want to pay my respect to the traditional owners of this land. We are Australians who have come to think a great deal about the relationship between the indigenous Australians and the land and our relationship to indigenous people, those who for so long have been the spirit within this country. That might be something which is unique, it's part of our Australian identity, but there are a lot of other things which are unique to the Australian identity, and I think, to Australian society. It is a place where we have the opportunity to do things that many other communities don't have. I look around this room and see many people who have taken that opportunity to think about our own faiths, our own religions, our own history and culture, and said, how can this help me contribute to building a better society which has an Australian aspect as well as an international aspect. I recall vividly the events after the terrorist attack in September 11, 2001. I recall more than anything else that within a very few number of days there was a huge gathering just across the road here in Martin Place, organised by Christians, Muslims and Jews but with well-accepted participation of Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs and Ba'his. What did we want to do in Australia as those with responsibility for religious communities? There was talk about our common humanity at a time when people felt under enormous pressure.

When I relate this to people in other countries there is disbelief. How did you have a relationship that allowed this? Weren't you too overwhelmed to think that way? I can't tell you the number of people who contacted myself and other people who were signatories to a media release on the subject, people who rang crying with thanks from all communities made me think that we were able to offer something which was needed from our unique Australian experience.

Only yesterday I was in Canberra with a group of people including some here today who were meeting together as delegates to the next meeting of the Asia Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue, an initiative taken by the Australian and Indonesian federal governments, now with support of the Philippine and New Zealand governments involving a number of countries in our area. Interfaith delegations going to participate in trying to work out we can use religion as a force for good in a region where so many conflicts have been framed in religious ways. When I went to the Conference last year in the Philippines I was exposed to conflicts which don't figure very much on the radar in this country. Conflicts between Christians and Hindus in

Fiji, conflicts in Thailand, conflicts in the Philippines and Indonesia which are better known, but areas where we want to see how we as people who are true to our own religious belief, who don't see the purpose of dialogue to make people be like us, more importantly to see how we can use the positive sources in our own faith to contribute to building a better world. While our immediate focus in Australia may be Asia, for geographic reasons, the mindset extends well beyond and I think relates to the idea of what we can do for peace-building in the Middle East.

I have to make clear, I don't claim to be a particularly learned Jew. There are many more learned Jews in this room than I am. But I do claim to be a learning Jew. I want to hear from others. I want to know more. I want to be informed about how better I can contribute to my society, and I'm here to day as much as to learn as to contribute to this discussion.

We have another unique body in Australia, the Australian National Dialogue of Christians, Moslems and Jews. Again what we do in Australia is looked at overseas as something unique and remarkable. We don't only have groups of Christians, Moslems and Jews meeting together on an informal basis, we have regular discussions including topics which bother us. It would be very easy to meet together, as we found out, to talk about how we want to do more for migrants and indigenous Australians – that's easy stuff. We can do it as long as our goodwill is there, it is not complex, and it can be carried out anywhere. But we have also looked at the tough topics. We looked at Zionism, we looked at Jihad, we looked at the Trinity, and there was more than a trinity of views from the presenters when we discussed the trinity! There was more than five variations on Zionism when we spoke about Zionism, and Jihad when we spoke about Jihad, but all from people committed to their faith who want to talk in a civilised, sensible manner about issues which sometimes end in false stereotyping of others.

On the topics we discussed was the idea of a just war – what it means given all our religions advice of taking up arms, all the times we learn about the highest values of peace and human life. When it is necessary or reasonable or acceptable to take up arms in self-defence and only in self-defence? It was a learning experience for everybody, which informed us, not only about others, but also about ourselves. When I look at where religions have been successful in contributing to peace building and peace making, right at the heart are religions which are not only open to learning from others but do this from a basis of self-criticism first, asking yourself the tough questions so that you are willing to learn from others in discussions.

Here we have the opportunity to meet and to discuss and talk about problems in other parts of the world where we may be able to make a contribution, by encouraging those who speak a language of ethics, or morality and responsibility, above the language of self-interest, narrow nationalism or winning and losing. It's not always easy because we are as open to the influences of our society as anybody else. All of us are open to be influenced and caught up with the difference between patriotism or pride in who you are and nationalism between being confident in your identity and arrogance in your identity. We are all capable of being caught up in this so we have to be very conscious of that fact and work out how we can make a constructive contribution.

We are also lucky in Australia because we not only have that opportunity but many of us have the opportunity to travel. For some people it means leaving the Eastern suburbs and going past the University; for others it means leaving the hub of Greenacre and Lakemba and travelling to other parts of Sydney. There are some who would travel from Townsville to learn how to play basketball amongst other things. We have the opportunity and when we travel we are not always that polite! We'll ask questions sometimes, we'll talk to people we've just met as if they're friends; we'll be open and friendly. I remember once, just last year, I had the opportunity to meet with a particularly wise man overseas. We talked about what anybody who wanted to make a positive contribution to world peace, to human development from a religious perspective should be doing. He said very aggressively, "The first message you give to others is to tell them to criticise themselves first. When have run out of criticism of themselves and got themselves as true as they can be to God's wishes, then tell them to try to understand other religious people and they you will find you are already working together to establish a better world." It was fascinating I found because he had no problems coming straight out and saying what he thought was important to hear.

The advantage we have in Australia I should mention which is sometimes lost on those not in relations with others is an understanding that religious bodies as faith communities are dynamic. Their thinking is an ongoing process, for example, for the Catholic Bishops here today, think of the Catholic attitude to Jews 100 years ago as against today. Think of the attitude towards various groups towards their own doctrine of many churches today as against some time ago and you understand that serious thinking religious people are not trapped by time. Hopefully if they are owned by any factor, it is not time, it's owned by a belief there is wisdom to be learnt and important work to be done.

I did something unusual for me before today, that is, I prepared some notes. I did more research than I normally would. When I look at my notes I realize I would be speaking to you about things you already know, particularly about the place of religion in a person's identity. I don't want to go through that because I think it's something we are thinking about already and of which we are very conscious. But it is probably worth saying that because religion affirms who we are, it can also affirm who we are not. When we are in the process of affirming who we are not, you can either come out with positive affirmation but also negative division and conflict. And that conflict can be between families, communities, ethnic and national, as can the positive relationship. Precisely because religion addresses not only the smallest components of identity but also the broadest, religion has the capacity to counteract conflict and exploitation of differences through emphasising those dimensions of commonality that should bind people together above and beyond the particular different components of our identity. Those words aren't mine, they come from Rabbi David Rosen who many of us were hoping could be here today and be able to present.

Rabbi David Rosen came to Australia just last year and while he was here he met with representatives of different religions, different faith communities, to take the opportunity we have here to sit around simply and hear and learn from each other. Earlier in the same process Imam Hendy (?) from Georgetown University came and shared his thoughts and more recently a Catholic priest from Poland also came to

share his views around the table. The bottom line from all these discussions was that religion can be the cause of us addressing a problem and trying to deal with it seriously, or finding a way to say we don't have to deal with the problem. It can be something that divides or something that unites. When we are involved in uniting it's worth looking at other faiths. When I was reviewing some of the literature relating to Judaism and peace-building in the Middle East something jumped out at me. That is, the concept that you can learn a great deal about the nature of any people by looking at their heroes. The first heroes of the Jewish people were the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In the Bible and classic Jewish commentary they are shown as peace-loving reconcilers. Potentially deadly disputes were settled by accommodation. Bishop Chacour has referred to Abraham as the father figure. Then we look at the prophets in Jewish terms. Prophets were denouncing and opposing injustice and cruelty. They looked at military alliances and war and envisioned an end to injustice and war. If we continue through post-Talmud times some of our heroes (Albert Einstein, Martin Buber) were poets, philosophers and scientists. They are held very close to the heart of Jewish people thinking about and wanting to contribute to our society.

When we move further from here and closer to the centre of the Middle East you can see a great deal of ambiguity in the political spheres at least, about where religion fits in to peace-making. There were two reports about the absence of religious figures at the signing of peace accords in the Middle East. You have the political figures standing there but no religious figures who might lend a message of authority or community endorsement. The Jewish report said that the view that was being expressed was by the Israelis at the time was that peace-making is going to be hard enough without dealing with symbolism and ritual, which was that Israeli leader's view of what religion was likely to contribute. The Palestinian report said lock up the clergy because they get in the way of us dealing with problems the way we want to deal with them. It was a similar outlook for both sides, rather than saying we have society, we have religious identities, we have people who care, we have people who can give guidance to leadership, let's include them and let them empower us. Perhaps some political figures fear too many prayers for wisdom might affect them in a negative way, but it is a statement of fact that when you ask religious figures what they see as their role in the Middle East, it is to pray for wisdom, and to imbue any political debate with a different moral dimension and a forward-looking dimension.

I had thought about going into the place of peace in Judaism in some depth. It's overwhelmingly stated in Jewish tradition, in Jewish learning, in Biblical text that if you look at God's plans and "all the ways are pleasant ways and all the paths are peace". The idea of peace is central in many places. The whole Torah itself is for the sake of the ways of peace. If you look holistically at Judaism you are going to find an overwhelming commitment to peace. It is easy to cherry-pick any religion and say this is what this one says without looking at what is meant, or the context, or the tradition of that religion. One of the complications we have, not just in the Middle East, is when you have conflicts that are not theological or doctrinal in any sense but where perceived interpretation is involved. The United States institute of peace came out with a study recently about some of these conflicts and the first one was looking at the Shi'a /Sunni in Iraq. The issues are about political and economic power. Some of the most defenceless are minorities who are collateral damage in this struggle. Examples can be drawn in a number of circumstances.

One of the focuses of people trying to deal with peace making in the Middle East has been dialogue there. I know about the dialogues we have here and the discussions we have here and I understand where we have got to, where we can get to, the limitations and different sorts of dialogues, and I recognise it can take place in an environment where we can talk civilly to each other and if we make a drastic mistake hopefully we can make it right after. There is a lot less room to manoeuvre when you talk about a place where there is high tension, where there is life and death issues being raised all the time.

(Tape ran out.)