

Influences of Religion on the World Today

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I will try to contribute to the dialog and not be redundant in what I say. As I prepared these remarks, I thought of three parts: dealing a bit with the universals of the Abrahamic faith traditions and then some of the pathologies -- we might say -- the dark side, and some of the best practices as we are seeing here with the Center for Ethno-Religious Mediation or the work of the Three Amigos. [Imam Jamal Rahman, Pastor Don Mackenzie and Rabbi Ted Falcon, the Interfaith Amigos, have worked together and given talks on the importance of inter-religious harmony since the attack on the World Trade Towers in New York in 2001.] There is a lot of this going on. As I come at this, I see us globally in a unique context -- that we are at a time of great religious resurgence in the world. My own view of that, and I am not alone in this view, is that what many of us knew as the cold war era, which lasted until about 1990, was an era when two ideologies dominated, neither of which was profoundly spiritual or religious in nature, although they had strong moral backings. I am talking about the Western liberal democratic capitalist world and the

communist world. They tended to dominate global affairs and global thinking and to some extent -- it's a great generalization. Yet, religion became somewhat privatized; one might argue that in both of these great dominant traditions, the secularization thesis was in play -- that as modernization or education or global liberation occurred, we would see increasing diminution of the expressions of religion. We would be more enlightened and less religious.

Lo and behold! The cold war ends and we see that what might have been somewhat dormant (or not as much on Main Street but to some extent on the back streets) began to present itself in dramatic and powerful ways. We observe what happened in the former Yugoslavia, which had held together, but suddenly we have seven or eight nations, each of which to some extent is linked to ethno-religious identities, though not exclusively. We all exist in multiple identities simultaneously. We are have political identities, strong passionate identities -- national, cultural and so on. All these aspects of our single identity are made up of the plurality of our identities.



Contrary qualities

The time we are living in, religiously, is fascinating. There are many dark aspects to this time and many positive aspects. I think others have articulated already -- better than I can do -- many of the universals of the shared traditions that cut across religions. Those universals apply in areas of doctrine or theology and

areas of ethics (the golden rule...) and in areas of ritual. All three traditions mostly exercise prayer and some sort of worship, set aside a day for that worship and believe in things like fasting, reaching out and seeking divine guidance. Ritual, doctrine, theology, ethics are common, as is the emphasis on sacred texts.

There is so much overlap among the three Abrahamic traditions. We can talk about Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, Moses and so on. They are recognized and part of the grand narrative. In fact, there is a deep familial relationship among these faiths. The lineage of the faiths is outlined in these texts. I remember listening to Jonathan Sacks at the Council on Foreign Relations a few months ago. He said that so much of Judaism and the Torah is about a family unfolding. So you have Adam and Eve leading to Abraham and Abraham's two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael is the progenitor eventually of Mohammed and the line of Jesus comes from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob.... So, there is a strong familial kinship that leads perhaps to the hypersensitivity that characterizes these relationships oftentimes. There are commonalities, universalities.

The other thing -- moving out of the religious context to looking at our world, even looking at broader movements -- is that there are patterns in our world of universals and particulars as Rev. Mackenzie mentioned. We have the ideal of the Enlightenment, which was a universalist ideal -- that human rationality was shared by everyone and we could come together and understand universal moral principles, universal values, and build global communities around that. The profit motive, too, was a global principle and ideal, leading to free markets and opening up globalization and utilizing technology globally. There are universal trends; we are networked more than ever before globally and aware of one another in a global sense.



Backward movement

However, there are also strong tendencies toward what we might call the counter-Enlightenment. We are seeing these at play -- the Brexit vote, for example. Some forces are uncomfortable with the idea of regional cooperation in the EU or the African Union or ASEAN nations. That is, they are uncomfortable with alliances formed among sovereign states that in some way become transnational -- or with certain tendencies within that type of development. We see that such counter-enlightenment tendencies are at play as well on the geopolitical or international scene.

You may have read recently that certain nations are withdrawing from the International Criminal Court. This is another sign that not everyone, like the Brexiters, buys into this universalism, this globalization, the concept of universal standards that are objective and that every rational person will agree to. Some are expressing this.

Similar religious trends

I'm sorry to branch into the geopolitical, but I think it is relevant to what we are discussing. There is interplay, just like with ethnicity and religion; the political, geographical location and context are relevant to who we are and what we do. The strong tendency for more nationalism would be the analogue with the more conservative or more fundamental religions -- you have nationalistic trends in political parties, and these are growing globally. The liberal democratic enterprise is becoming a minority. Twenty-five years ago, we would have scoffed at that. Liberal, democratic, open societies and free market were going to prevail and everyone was going to adopt them. But that hasn't been a linear path. Authoritarian democracy is on the rise dramatically around the world as are markets under government control, and we

are seeing religion sometimes linking up with that. I am going to make generalizations, but even in Russia, some people talk about President Putin as a relatively more authoritarian democratic figure, under whom there is not as much free press, at least as liberals see it.

Yet the church in Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church, has some compatibility and friendliness toward that. When Crimea was taken, theological language, like what you often find in America, was applied to the acquisition of Crimea: This is a sacred duty and enterprise that we are embarking on. I do not say this to be critical. I am saying it to be an observer. In India, the more committed Hindu believers, who want to see more of a Hindu nation, strongly back Prime Minister Narendra Modi. That is a generalization. Please correct me if I am wrong, but there are strong trends there. At least, there has been concern by some minorities within South Asia.



Religious literacy

This trend is occurring in the world, a linking between religion and the geopolitical. That is why if you study international relations now, you don't say, Well, religion is a private affair. We have to get down to the business of realpolitik -- what is going on in the world -- and religion is aside.

No. Religious literacy becomes absolutely essential to doing the work of international relations. Geopolitical work everywhere entails being informed and educated; that is, religiously literate. This is what Madelaine Albright, a former US secretary of state says. She wrote a book on the topic, *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God, and World Affairs*. The title is a play on words that says religious literacy is imperative because a secretary of state or anyone who deals with global issues or global affairs needs to be appreciative of religion both as problematic and beneficial. I think we should never forget that the benefits of religion vastly outweigh the problematic aspects.

Sometimes religion becomes the scapegoat for problems, because from the enlightenment perspective or the ideal of universal rationality, people who are believers are backward anyway. One of the narratives is that religion is always prone to violence. Far from it -- hospitals, charities, work for helping those in need -- is widely practiced in all three traditions to a massive scale, globally. God forbid had we not those resources and those assets. Religion brings powerful, necessary, important assets to bear on solving global problems.

Progress and growth

I'll shift to my last section on what is going on that is good. One: A lot of stuff is happening at the UN that wouldn't have happened twenty years ago, in the area of religions. Just in 2015, Pope Francis gives the opening address, opening of the UN General Assembly, here in New York City. He had the program down at Ground Zero in the morning and spoke that same morning at the United Nations.

One of the summits was on climate change, and he had weighed in on that with an encyclical letter. His words are respected because he is not just some privatized little guy over there; he represents a billion Catholics. Now, not all Catholics share exactly the same beliefs.... This is something we should never lose sight of, too. To speak about Islam, Christianity or Judaism as if each was one thing. Oh my God! Their beliefs and practices are all over the place [vary greatly among believers] in each one of them. Let us not lose sight of that.

The issues are not just among the Abrahamic faiths but the quarrels are even deeper within the three traditions, many times deeper within Christianity, within Islam, within Judaism. I was reading a book

about Elizabethan England as portrayed in Shakespeare's plays. In many of the dramas are mentions of Muslims. Elizabethan England made overtures to the Turks and the North Africans, to the Muslim world, in part because they could talk to them, but these abominable Catholics on the continent were absolutely impossible! Sometimes you find common ground outside your tradition because it is so difficult internally.

At the UN, the Jordanian mission to the UN proposed establishing World Interfaith Harmony Week. So the General Assembly of the United Nations, 193 nations, voted "yes." Every year, the first week of February is World Interfaith Harmony week.

An interagency task force, from many agencies and NGOs related to the UN, concentrates on how to achieve the sustainable development goals: a fifteen-year agenda and a set of goals and 169 targets. Globally, all the nations realize that for this we need to bring to bear the assets that religions have. To ignore them or exclude them or to think that they are irrelevant is folly. Religions have access to people at the grassroots level, touching their hearts and minds often at the most deep and fundamental level. Interfaith is prospering. The Parliament of the World's Religions convenes every four or five years, dating back to 1893 and the Chicago Parliament of the World Religions at the time of the Columbia Exhibition. Religions for Peace.... Recently the Saudis set up a program in Vienna, the KAICIID, the King Abdullah International Center for Inter-religious and Intercultural Dialogue, a major investment to promote inter-religious dialog.

Last year, they celebrated fiftieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, a statement by the Catholic Church that it had opened up to truths in non-Christian religions. In other words, that it had set aside exclusivity. This was a development of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council (Vatican Two, 1962–65). This was a significant development. John Paul XXIII, Paul VI contributed, and it came out in the name of Paul XXVI, at the time of Vatican II. They just convened a fiftieth anniversary to honor this and people of all faiths gathered at the Gregorian University in Rome and had a private audience with His Holiness. This was a landmark within one of the major branches of Christianity, Catholicism, which made this official statement.

The world Council of Churches is doing great work. I think also of the Amman Message, of King Abdullah of Jordan, which attempted two things: to create a core consensus within Islam that this was the true and authentic Islam, but that there were aberrations, so the core beliefs of Islam should articulate that vision and come to a consensus about it. It went on, though, to look to and use this passage that Imam Rahman [one of the Three Interfaith Amigos] quoted a couple of times, to emphasize that God created all of these ethnicities and religions that we might know one another and love one another.

My point is that great work just like the work that is being done here is being done in cities and places all over the world, not only in America, but globally. It is encouraging, necessary. Yesterday I was watching the Ted Talk of Jonathan Haidt. Perhaps some of you know his work, *The Righteous Mind*, which he based on evolutionary psychology, is to me quite insightful. We are somewhat "inbred," virtually, with some poor instincts—toward care and compassion on the one hand but leaning toward the formation of tribes and groups on the other. Both of these grow out of human evolution; just as many believe religion was part of our evolution of consciousness and instrumental even in a somewhat Darwinian sense of survival of the fittest, because groups had to learn to cooperate, to work together. What brought about that cooperation? I am not saying God is simply a projection of psychological factors, but that there is also a way to understand how religion makes sense even seen from the point of the view of evolutionary psychology.



A desire for definition

These tendencies, even toward conservatism, are not folly. It's not foolish. People do want to define the boundaries of our community. What are the truths? What are the values we uphold? How do we create order within this community? Is "Whatever!" an answer we can give? On the one hand, we know we can, but on the other hand, if that open-endedness goes too far, into extremism, fundamentalism, that's "pathological." It becomes extremely problematic. The real issue that we are all continually seeking is balance between these legitimate tendencies.

Look up Jonathan Haidt some time. *The Righteous Mind*, is also good for this political season, because it helps us deal with those unbelievable idiots that don't vote like we do, who must be depraved at the deepest and most profound level.

The last thing: I remember Karen Armstrong [an ex-nun (Catholic) who has written at least twenty- five books on a variety of religions] in an interview on television when asked "What's your faith background?" said she couldn't give a clear answer but said she was kind of a hybrid.

It think that is valuable. I am not talking about syncretism. We don't want to say that inter-religious dialog leads to dilution of our traditions, but the learning process does, in a way. For nationality, you can say I am an Italian-American or something like that. That also could evolve increasingly for religion. Many people practice yoga who are good Jews, for example, and learn that yoga is not just exercise. They poke a little deeper and say, Wow! There are some deep truths here and I can build that into my growing development of self.... I have strayed from my text, but I hope to have shared a few thoughts that added to the mix. Thank you for the opportunity to share a few words.