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Politik mit der Religion

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Politics & Religion – A Fundamental Question?

I am both grateful and honored to be speaking at this interreligious conference in Loccum. The work of this Academy is well known in many parts of the world because of its long and distinguished record in effectively confronting the critical issues that face the human family. The American Jewish Committee, through its Harriet and Robert Heilbrunn Institute for International Interreligious Understanding, is pleased to be a cosponsor of this conference.

As some of you may know, the American Jewish Committee officially opened its office in Berlin in February 1998. In the brief time since then, the AJC office, directed by Eugene Dubow, has done significant work in strengthening German-Jewish, German-American, and interreligious relations.

Another of my AJC colleagues, Jonathan Levine who directs our Chicago office in the United States, is a board member of this Academy, and all of us at the AJC are pleased that Jonathan is an active participant in this important work.

I could not begin these remarks without paying special tribute to the tireless efforts of Sybille Fritsch-Oppermann who brings such skill and dedication to her labors in behalf of the Loccum Academy. It has been a joy to work with her, and I look forward to continued close association in the future.

Through its many diverse programs, this Academy has time and again happily disproved the false assumption held by far too many people that religious teachings and the religious imagination have little role to play in the so-called „real world“ of politics. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. Politics and religion, or better, political questions and religious responses are intimately linked in an eternal embrace that transcends time, distance, or personalities.

And while technology may be advancing at a rapid speed (but hasn't this been true for every generation?), the human condition and human nature remain the

A. James Rudin

same. Men and women, whether by cuneiform or by E-mail, will always ask penetrating questions about the world „as it is“ and „as it ought to be.“ Some things will never change. And even if the exciting electronic advances in communication someday make us into an actual global village, the eternal inquiries will always remain.

How should our society be organized and governed? What is political and religious truth? What is the nature of compassion, both collective and individual? What is justice? What is love? Cynics and others who pride themselves on „realpolitik“ may scoff at these questions, but they cannot be so easily dismissed as either foolish or naive. These inquiries are not simply homiletical in nature, nor are they rhetorical. Rather, they represent the deepest longings of the human spirit. And the answers that people reach on a spiritual level, even unconsciously, frequently affect their political behavior.

Neither religion nor politics represent a clean slate, devoid of tradition, experience, and ideology. It is our job as political and religious leaders to make certain that the proper entries are written and embedded upon that slate. We have a major responsibility for shaping the kind of political society that we and our families will live in during the next century.

And because we are meeting in Germany, the questions of politics and religion have a special poignancy, a special edge, that hovers over our proceedings. God forbid, that we in our own generational quest to balance the legitimate demands of both religion and politics, make the same kind of tragic mistakes that occurred in this land earlier this century.

Fortunately, the Evangelische Akademie provides a superb setting to explore this critical theme.

I strongly believe that while religion, of course, does not have a monopoly on how the political realm should be organized, the religious community does have some suggestions and warnings to offer. Both the constructive suggestions and the dire warnings are the result of our diverse historical experiences as people of faith. It would be a tragedy if religious leaders were to absent themselves from dealing with the thorny and complex political issues of our own time. For religion and its leaders to absent themselves from the arena of politics, the public square, the marketplace of ideas, would be a failure of spiritual nerve and a betrayal of our basic

ideals. I repeat: while religion may not have ALL the answers for establishing and maintaining a healthy, free, and democratic political order, nonetheless, it does have something of importance to offer.

But before religion can play a constructive role in shaping society, it must first address some serious internal questions of its own. Religion, all religions, must first put its own house in order if it is to venture forth from the synagogue, church, mosque, and temple into the political world.

But I am fearful that the new century that is just weeks away from beginning will see a profound reversal of roles from those played by religion and politics in this century. Let me explain.

Twentieth century political tyrants, despots, and dictators frequently expropriated authentic religion to advance their own authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. Being in Germany reminds all of us of the wretched record of the Nazi-dominated „Deutsche Christen“ churches in the 1930s and 1940s. That utter corruption of religion is clear evidence of how religion and its potent symbols were systematically manipulated and profaned by Nazi leaders, political and spiritual. We are still repelled by the photographs from the Nazi period that feature Christian pastors proudly wearing the swastika on their ecclesiastical garments and robes.

The Communist regime in the former Soviet Union also sought to either destroy religious institutions or control them in order to enhance its own political power. One remembers with deep pain how Joseph Stalin, once a former Orthodox Christian seminarian, corrupted and exploited the Russian Orthodox Church for his own evil purposes.

Surprisingly, we see the reverse taking place in certain parts of the world today. Extremist leaders of religion are corrupting and manipulating the political systems of their countries as a means of imposing their own kind of totalitarianism upon society. But this time it is a totalitarianism that is religious in nature. Whereas the 20th century saw political leaders like Hitler and Stalin use religion to impose a political dictatorship upon a nation, today we are currently witnessing religious leaders using the political system to impose a religious dictatorship upon a nation. Unfortunately, this ominous trend is growing and not abating in its ferocity and power. Echoes of the terrible cries from the European Middle Ages are once again being heard: „Error has no rights!“ and „God wills it!“

A. James Rudin

For that reason, it is absolutely incumbent upon religious and political leaders like ourselves, whether Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, to vigorously oppose this dangerous phenomenon. If we permit the religious extremists to gain and consolidate their political power, we will be judged harshly by future generations for failing to see what is the central danger of our generation.

Brutal suppression of independent thought and belief and physical assaults upon the innocent do not always emerge from a political despotism. They can and do emerge from the religious community as well. The quest for religious purity in a nation-state is often as dangerous as the quest for racial or political purity.

The imposition of harsh and restrictive religious laws upon a total society, brutal assassinations of moderate political leaders by gunmen who quote sacred texts or publicly assert that they kill for God, and the abuse of basic human rights in the name of religion... these realities will, sadly, it seems be a central component of the new century.

In addition to curbing the spiritual zealots that exist in every religious community, we need to do something else as well; something that will take courage, stamina, and vision. What is critically needed in the dynamic interplay between politics and religion is the urgent need to develop what I like to call, a „theology of pluralism“ that is rooted in our own unique and distinctive religious traditions.

Physicians are commanded to first heal themselves and to do no harm before they can successfully heal people. Likewise, religion and its leaders must first free themselves of divine-centered hubris, and mindless attempts to spiritually annihilate one's neighbour before they can offer any positive solutions to the political sphere.

This quest for a viable theology of pluralism is no easy assignment because people of faith and the faiths themselves need to plumb the depths of their spiritual traditions to discover the necessary religious support for pluralism. It is not enough that we simply live together as unique faith communities, hopefully without tension or conflict. We need to do more than that.

But pluralism arouses intense reactions among people. No one, it seems, is neutral about it. Some people compare pluralism to a symphony orchestra with individual members or groups playing different instruments. By themselves, these individuals or groups are only soloists, but playing together they make beautiful music.

Using this analogy, pluralism means no individual or group is more dominant or more important than any other orchestra members.

Of course, the reverse of this analogy might also be true. Instead of a harmonious symphony orchestra, pluralism can also mean a dissonant sound, discordant and disruptive.

Those who distrust pluralism believe it seriously undermines religious beliefs and weakens spiritual identities. Such people often believe pluralism can undermine the stable homogeneous political order as well.

Still others may grudgingly concede that while theological diversity does exist „de facto.” they are unhappy about its existence. In their heart of hearts they still believe, „I know there are many religions in the world, but if I had my way, I would want everyone in my nation or society to believe as I and my religious group do.”

But a theology of pluralism compels individuals to acknowledge there are various ways to achieve a spiritually fulfilling life. While all religions are true for their adherents, pluralism posits the claim that no one religion contains all the truth for everyone. With such bold assertions, is it any wonder that the concept of religious pluralism can affirm our deepest faith commitments and profoundly challenge them at the same time?

Pluralism, whether desired or not, means that all groups and individuals have a distinctive contribution to the well-being and enrichment of society.

Pluralism means that a religion with a large number of members is not theologically superior to a religion that appeals to only a few. And a majority is not permitted to dominate or persecute a minority. Obviously, this kind of pluralism has not been accepted throughout the world. Indeed, it remains a distant goal for many people and many societies.

Not far from where we meet, that kind of religious and political pluralism is being put to the test in the sorely troubled Balkans. Several hundred miles west of here we have witnessed a lengthy terrible blood letting in Northern Ireland, and much of that violence that is hopefully coming to an end was based upon perceived religious differences. The Middle East, the Sudan, the Indian sub continent remain open wounds where neither religious nor political pluralism has taken firm root.

Because our tiny planet is plagued by religious extremism, our faiths must sustain and nurture our shared existence in an increasingly pluralistic setting. Unless

A. James Rudin

that takes place, the cruel winds of religious extremism and bigotry, combined with political and cultural turbulence and economic dislocation can spell disaster. Believers have no trouble affirming and celebrating the truth of their own religion. It is much harder, but equally important, for people of faith to acknowledge the truth and legitimacy of other religions.

Today, it is no longer sufficient, much less desirable, for separate faith communities merely to live side by side, usually in mutual ignorance and suspicion. Instead, religious faith must provide a genuine spiritual mooring in a world where people who believe differently can live in spiritual and political peace.

A theological underpinning would ensure pluralism's permanence no matter what the political, economic, or social conditions of a society may be. A pluralism rooted in religious affirmations is more enduring than even a well-intentioned sense of tolerance for the diverse spiritual beliefs that exist among one's neighbours.

Earlier this month Roman Catholic Archbishop Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee, Wisconsin in the United States spoke at a large interreligious gathering in that city. In addition to denouncing anti-Semitism, the Archbishop articulated the kind of spiritual understanding that is required in the quest to create a theology of pluralism:

„I believe that our faith compels us to see each other as created in the same unique image of God and that we both bear the image of the same God within us. I acknowledge that, because of that same image, we must stop seeing each other as rivals before the one God, because we are brothers and sisters in that one God's unique and living love.“

I am confident that Archbishop Weakland's statement can be theologically validated by other Christian leaders as well as by Jewish and Muslim religious leaders. I strongly believe the rich traditions of our faiths contain within them the taproots for a theology of pluralism. What is needed is the will to devote the passion and commitment to this sacred task that will benefit not only the spiritual communities of the world, but the political world as well.

Let me be clear: as a Jew and a rabbi who has lived through the middle and latter part of this century, I believe a strong religious pluralism is a necessary antidote, a powerful counter force, to the horrendous totalitarianisms that have dominated so much of this century.

Obviously, in a century that has produced fascism, communism, and Nazism, two world wars, the Holocaust, atomic and hydrogen bombs, other weapons of mass destruction, and endless ethnic and religious wars, the need for a viable, theologically rooted sense of pluralism is self-evident. In fact, I would strongly argue that modern totalitarianism, in whatever its evil form, is the absolute antithesis of the kind of pluralism I am advocating.

While some people think theology is a set of eternal beliefs etched in stone, I believe theology constantly changes, as does political governance, from generation to generation. As we well know, in the past some theologians provided strong religious sanctions for believing that women, blacks, Jews, homosexuals, and many „other“ groups were inferior humans and spiritual beings. Fiercely held tenets about hell as a place of punishment after death are now sharply challenged by the belief that we pay for our sins here on earth through guilt, shame, and disgrace.

Theological concepts attributing masculine characteristics to God are under severe attack. And theologians are constantly reinterpreting the Bible's meaning, the definition of prayer, the nature of God, and such concepts as sin, miracles, and revelation. From the very beginning of its existence as a religious tradition, Judaism has had to confront, sometimes in friendly ways, sometimes in murderous hostility, the presence of other religious and political traditions. Through the long centuries, Jews and Judaism have been compelled to make sense of non-Jews and other religions that are not Judaism.

But then Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism have had similar problems of relating to their neighbours, and in some cases to adherents of a religion that predated their own. In the case of Christianity, this has created special problems because of its own Jewish origins, its Jewish roots, and the claim, held by many Christians, that their religious faith, often backed by the might of a Christian political system, is in fact, the successor to Judaism.

While I certainly have some specific ideas and suggestions For Christians and Muslims on the subject, developing an authentic theology of pluralism is best left to Christian and Islamic scholars and religious leaders. Each of us must work in our own religious tradition/ But because our three faiths are so interrelated by fate and faith, by history and geography, neither I and my Jewish colleagues nor Christian and Muslim theologians can act in isolation from one another.

A. James Rudin

In a very real sense, „the whole world is watching“ what we achieve, or fail to achieve, in the area of a theology of pluralism. Insightful religious leaders from many spiritual traditions have always recognized what is so apparent today: there will always be a wide spectrum of religious expressions, beliefs, and thoughts in God's world. Sadly, we have through the centuries tried many terrible ways, often in league with the political rulers of the day, to eliminate that God-ordained diversity. For some religious groups, it simply meant praying for the conversion of the „other.“

In other cases, it meant more than pious prayers. It meant forced conversions, coercion, manipulation, expulsion, and worse. And as every Jew keenly knows, throughout the centuries some Christians and some Muslims have trained their full arsenals of political and spiritual weapons upon the Jewish people. This assault was verbal in some lands and ages, spiritual in other places, and physical in yet other times in our long history as a people.

But to no avail. Religious diversity has endured; indeed, it has grown in scope and richness. And this is the key message the religious community has for the political realm. Diversity is the norm of human existence. Unity is a commendable goal, but not uniformity, neither political nor religious.

Because religious pluralism is such a frail and tender plant, it, like political pluralism, needs constant nurturing and support. Hopefully, authentic pluralists in both the religious and political spheres can cross-fertilize both communities. But as mentioned above, the religious community cannot do this until and unless, it has developed its own theology of pluralism.

It is, after all these years, at last time to come to terms with religious diversity, and to cease all attempts to move people out of their traditional faith. In this paper I have offered a starting place by citing the urgent need for a coherent and acceptable theology of pluralism. I urge my sisters and brothers in the Christian and Islamic communities to do likewise and move forward in this quest.

We have tried everything but religious pluralism in the past, and in so doing we have inflicted terrible, horrific suffering upon those who do not share our faith. Because of this gruesome record, just perhaps, we can finally understand that religious pluralism, and with it the twin gift of democratic political pluralism, might in fact be the will of God. At least I hope so.

Muhammad Hourani

Defining the Muslim-Jewish Interfaith Dialogue

I am very happy to address you immediately after my Prof. from the Hebrew University. Just to tell you an anecdote, in Tel-Aviv airport I am always asked about the aim of my visit and about the personalities, with whom I am going to meet. I was asked this time also. When I mentioned the name of Prof. Avinari, the young policewoman said, "It is O.K he was also my Prof., have a nice trip".

I would like to come back again to the discussion we held before, and say: we still feel as Moslems and Arabs that there is a kind of misunderstanding, a kind of generalization of Islam and our history, and even a kind of bad image and prejudice.

When Islam is judged it is judged through Western eyes. Concepts and values of the West are the basis of this misunderstanding. It is true to say Islam is judged through misunderstandings in Western concepts. Prof. Avinari said: Relate to Islam as it is. And this is what we, the Moslems are asking for.

Now what is the real meaning of pluralism? Is it to negate my right to be different? Why is it O.K to be different here in Europe, but one is not allowed to keep a kind of diversity in his own country? Am I not able to sharpen my cultural, religious ethnic and social character as a Moslem? If we accept ourselves as different peoples who come together in order to deepen and to widen our understanding, then we should acknowledge the fact that Islam is different. Moslems have different history, different holy book and, a different prophet. We do not share you the same ways, values and roots – as Jews and Christians – the same ways, values and the same roots. Do in Islam, through out its historical development, there has always been is a wide gap between theory and practice. Principles are put aside many times for the benefit of the reality. All the time, we see, different kinds of compromises with reality. It is enough just to examine the process of secularism, the status