



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

“What is the Contribution of Religions to Peace?”
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Abstract

“Religion” has been evoked both as a unifying and divisive force. Its role and value in public life has been inversely related to the resurgence of religion and spirituality in modern times, as a private, personal affair. This inner dimension of religion can be the first step in paving the way towards a more peaceful society and way of life. However, meaning is given to this inner commitment only through its externalisation, which can take the form, in some cases, of tolerance and openness. The role of the human being and the value placed upon human dignity is a point of convergence in religious traditions. By harnessing this common element and finding the means to articulate this and other shared values, religions, collectively and collaboratively, can act as agents of practical and meaningful social change.

The Religious Legacy

Much has been said, written and recorded in history about the role of ‘religion’ in laying the foundations for civilised life. A great deal has also been said, written and recorded about the conduct of people who, in the name of religion, have done and continue to do much to destabilise society. Both aspects of religion call for honest appraisal as an essential step in the search for a way forward: a path forward towards peace, through dialogue and joint action, if that path is to be illuminated by the insights of religious traditions.

One critical lesson of history is to alert us to the danger of religious polemics. Do these, perhaps, arise from conceit, the pride of arrogating to oneself the monopoly of truth? We are Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus and Buddhists out of our own sincere conviction. But true sincerity goes hand in hand with a sense of humility: the humility to appreciate that each of us, endowed with the gift of intellect and an inheritance of history, may choose a different path in our search for our origins and return.

The Death of Religion?

Many predictions have been made of the imminent death of religion in the face of material progress. But increasingly, intelligent and sincere observers are questioning the tendency of destructive malaise in our recent past and current era, despite the unprecedented wealth of knowledge at our disposal, with the potential for immense positive impact for societal benefit. And increasingly, they are realising that this malaise, this corruption of conscience, has occurred together with an erosion of the idiom of faith in public life, especially in societies, which represent an overwhelming concentration of material power and influence.

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In this observation, there is a bright ray of light, which helps to reaffirm the ancient wisdom that the notion of the transcendent is a reliable source of stability in a world of doubt and uncertainty; that human relationships are fragile unless they are bonded by the ties of submission to the ultimate source of all benevolence.

International agencies, whether these be the United Nations or the World Bank, as well as such instruments of civil society as NGOs active in peace or development initiatives, are admitting that a major deficit in past public policies and strategies has been the absence of spiritual and moral values which religions represent and can mobilize. This courting of ancient wisdom is the challenge to the world of religions.

Religion and Inner Peace

Why is religion a force for peace? Let me try a brief answer, based on my understanding of my faith — Islam. As a Muslim, I am called upon to reflect, recognise and then declare my belief in the all-embracing transcendence, beyond which reality has no meaning.

At the same time, the Islamic revelation, the Holy Qur'an, teaches that the true relationship with the transcendence is one of soul, an inner, personal relationship, dependent on one's inner capacity, as conditioned by one's environment.

The Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "To know oneself is to know one's Lord."

In this profound statement lies the ultimate source of charity, of tolerance and of respect for other people's spiritual inclinations. For the Qur'an also says explicitly: "There is no compulsion in matters of faith." There can be no truer, stronger basis for dialogue than this charitable disposition.

Externalising Spiritual Commitment

But like other faith traditions, Islam holds that an inward, spiritual commitment is meaningless without outward, public action. The Qur'an vividly condemns, as a show of conceit, the piety of people who will not lift a finger to help the hungry orphan, the needy, and the marginalized of our society. And it speaks powerfully on the sanctity of human life: To kill one human being is, as if, to kill the entirety of humanity. To save one life is, as if, to save the entirety of humanity.

These spiritual and moral values find sweet resonance in the poetry of other religions. Among the devotional poems of India, the ancient home of hospitality to many faiths, a melody that stirs the heart, whatever one's persuasion, movingly proclaims: "Only he or she is a person of God who feels the pain of others."



Religion, Humanism and Dignity

Like that of other traditions, Islam is, thus, an ethic of social inclusion, of a shared humanity. Indeed, the Qur'an refers to the diversity of human races and cultures, of languages and colours, as among the merciful signs of Allah. It affirms that each people have been given a direction and calls upon all to come together and strive for goodness.

What is the sustainable basis for this coming together and striving for goodness? All religions converge towards one essential message: respect for the dignity of the human person. Some traditions say that the human person is made in the image of God; some say that God has breathed His own spirit in the human person. From this common commitment to respect for human dignity spring the cluster of values, which constitutes, what we may call, a transcendent or universal or global ethic, and which defines our shared humanity. These are the values that provide a pragmatic framework for friendly dialogue, joint action where feasible and honourable disagreement, if necessary. But what gives strength to this pragmatic framework is the spiritual purpose of seeking to elicit the noble, which resides in every human being.

The Necessity for Religious Collaboration

The challenge to our society of religions is how to progress from an articulation of our universal ethic; how not to stagnate in a complacency of platitudes. Each major religious tradition has come a long way in structuring itself to play an effective role in addressing the humanitarian or even the complex development needs of its own adherents and their neighbours. The challenge is how to bring about the collaboration of different faith agencies to harness and mobilise their combined intellectual, moral, material and networking resources to address together the pressing issues of dire poverty, hunger, ignorance, disease, domestic violence, gender inequity, oppression of minorities or environmental and cultural degradation. On such practical efforts depends durable peace.

How nice it would therefore be to see different faith agencies — Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim — planning and working together to avert or alleviate consequences of disaster, natural or man-made, wherever it strikes, Mozambique or Afghanistan, rather than leaving such efforts entirely to Oxfam or USAID or EU agencies or other governmental and non-governmental organisations.

Theology has divided in the past and has the potential to continue to do so. But what unite are the insights of theology, the values and the ethics that each faith inspires.

A hopeful beginning in this direction is the World Faiths Development Dialogue, which brings together the world's faiths and development institutions for the purpose of enhancing the world's development processes, alleviating poverty and building social cohesion among diverse groups.

If there is universal respect for God's greatest creation, man himself, then the joint challenge is to bring down walls and build bridges.



Let me end by a poignant narration from Prophetic tradition. On the day of judgement, Allah asks the son of Adam: “I was hungry; you did not feed me. I was thirsty; you did not give me water. I was sick; you did not attend to my affliction.” The wretched being replies: “Oh Lord of the worlds! How could I, a mere humble creature, feed You or quench Your thirst or treat Your affliction.” God replies: “Such and such of your neighbours were hungry, thirsty and ill. Had you really looked, you would have seen Me beside each one of them.”