

Forum: Peace in Revealed Religions

Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies

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It is a great pleasure to be here today and to represent the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in Rome at this forum entitled "Peace in Revealed Religions." I bring greetings from Cardinal Tauran and his collaborators at the Council. It is, of course, entirely appropriate to have invited the Holy See's department for interreligious relations to this gathering as well as others involved in interfaith work for the simple reason that today's topic is a common concern. We are in it together. The dangers and opportunities of our times are common dangers and common opportunities. Not only that but peace between religions is an integral dimension of peace in the world. There are, of course, those who would say that religions are the cause of war and conflict - that a dynamic of aggression and violence is inherent in religions and especially those that come under the rubric of "revealed religions." That of course is not the case. The two world wars of the last century were not religious wars. Nonetheless religion has been and is part of the story of human conflict and sometimes a very significant part of it. That surely is part of the rationale of this Conference.

I am sure that was also part of the motivation of Pope John Paul II when he convened a meeting of Christian leaders and leaders of other religions in Assisi in 1986 to pray for peace. The different religions did not pray together of course but they were present to each other's prayers. Pope John Paul affirmed all the participants in their prayer and said that although religious leaders cannot directly bring peace they can pray for peace and be united in that prayer. I think it would be good to reflect on that as we come together for this Conference. Assisi was a very inclusive event, grounded in deep theological conviction. Several times the Pope referred to the profound and hidden unity of humanity - something that was being acknowledged and explored on that day. I think it is important that we come together with some kind of sense of being one.

In the Christian faith peace is clearly seen as a gift of God. Jesus says to his disciples before his death "Peace I bequeath you, my own peace I give you. Peace that the world cannot give - that is my gift to you" (John 14,27). All of us see peace as God's gift and so it is vital that Christians, Muslims and Jews be genuinely open to the gift of peace as that gift is perceived and understood in each of our spiritual and cultural traditions. It is vital too that we have a framework or a vision for seeing each other as channels of peace - seeing each other as faith communities in which the gift of peace may be bestowed.

A problem we have today of course is that not only do some people see religion as a cultural factor that runs counter to peace, there is a serious lack of the religious literacy that would enable them to engage with the dynamics of faith and to understand how religions exist for the upbuilding of the human community. Let me explore that for a moment by referring to a

Symposium I attended recently on Religious Freedom which took place in relation to the meeting of Commonwealth Heads of Government. At the Second Vatican Council a Declaration on Religious Freedom was published entitled *Dignitatis Humanae*. It spoke against any kind of coercion in matters of religion and its main point was that religions must be rooted and grounded in human freedom. Faith is a crucial exercise of human freedom. What the statement didn't do was to endorse the culture of choice and personal entitlement which has developed so markedly in recent years - notably in the Western world - whether as an ideal or an aspiration. Now I think this is a major issue for all three of what are sometimes called the Abrahamic religions. "Religion" is not a matter of choice. Abraham did not choose to be the Father of a great nation. Moses did not choose to lead the Children of Israel out of slavery. Our Lady did not choose to be the mother of Jesus Christ. Rather they consented to being chosen and that consent was their act of faith. In St John's gospel Jesus says "You did not choose me. I chose you" God's choice in one way or another is the origin and ground of what the secular world refers to as our "religions." That reflection confirmed me in my growing conviction that the rhetoric of choice sits uneasily with the logic of faith and the logic of faith is not well understood

Two things strike me as especially important today. One is genuine commitment to a process of inter-religious dialogue in which we respect each other's stories - stories which both differ and converge - so that we can find a language and a framework for being at peace with one another in our distinctiveness. That is vital for the second thing which is to contribute together to making our societies and our world better places. We should be able to engage together with the secular world and the political order. We have many of the same questions. It is notable that in debates about religious freedom, the language that the secular world brings to the table is often the language of freedom, tolerance and the rule of law. But freedom for what and why? Tolerance of what? What about laws which are inadequate or even unjust? In a society which no longer has shared values and where the vision of a good society is fragile and unstable, religions have a vital role to play. If we of the "revealed religions" can articulate fundamental human values together then we can make a powerful contribution to the common good and to peace in the world.

When Pope Benedict came here in 2010 and spoke in Westminster Hall he acknowledged the rightful independence of the political order and also acknowledged that the moral foundations of peace and civilised life are accessible to human reason. But he said that the religions have a vital role to play in purifying and applying human reason. He said:

"Religion, in other words is not a problem for legislators to solve, but a vital contribution to the national conversation."

So we have a vital contribution to make to the creation of a good society and to peace in the world. I hope that this Conference will take that contribution forward and I assure you of the prayers and support of the Catholic Church in this endeavour.

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