

# PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

## Contribution of Religion to Peace in the Middle East

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Thank you very much for your introduction – I hope I deserve it. Your Eminence, ladies and gentlemen, let me express my great honour to be with you today to speak about the contribution of religion to peace in the Middle East. Before I start I would like to say that this initiative taken by the Bishops Commission for Ecumenism is of great importance because I believe this country has the capability to play the important role of a bridge. Australia does not have a history of religious conflict, but believe me, Australia can make history and bring religious understanding in reconciliation because of the way you are living. I have been here before and seen the religious institutions, and the way people are living together. I believe Australia can play this role of a bridge, not only in the Middle East but in all of the international communities.

Speaking about religion and politics, these are two separate things. For religion, let me tell you what Islam says about other religions. There are fundamental principles, especially regarding Christianity and Judaism. A Moslem cannot be a Moslem if he does not believe in Christianity and Judaism as messages from God. This is part of Islamic doctrine. I cannot be a Moslem if I don't believe in Jesus Christ and all the prophets. The Koran says about the Bible and the Torah that there are guidance and lights in the Bible and the Torah. The Koran says the people of the Bible follow what has been revealed in the Bible and the people of the Torah follow what has been revealed in the Torah. This means believing in the virginity of Mary and in Jesus Christ and his miracles – doing something extraordinary. The prophet Mohammed did not do miracles of this kind. So we don't have a religious problem between the three religions. Instead we have political problems. If you ask somebody how much is  $2 + 2$  and the answer is 5, this is wrong. But if the answer is 79, this is a different concept. When  $2 + 2 = 5$ , you can try to convince the other that this is wrong.

There are differences between the religious texts and the interpretation of the texts and this is the real problem we are facing today. The text is sacred and the meaning is unchangeable but the interpretation of the text is human and the human is open to being right or wrong. It is not absolute any more, it is relative: it is not permanent, it is changeable. What we are facing now in some Islamic circles of thought, deal with the previous interpretation of the Middle Ages as sacred as the text itself. The problem now is that the interpretation is open and there are many who use the interpretation of the sacred text for their political ends. That is hi-jacking religion and those who did this committed the biggest crime against the reputation of Moslems and against Islam. There is a dictum in the Babylonian heritage that talks about the virtues of compromise. It says where there is complete truth, there is no peace, and where there is peace, there is no complete truth. This was before all religions started in the Middle East. You have to remember that the Middle East is the place of the three religions. The Middle East is the place where more blood has been shed and more tears wept than any other place in the world.

Since Babylonian times there has been this compromise between truth and peace. Seeking perfect justice may be fine, but it is not compatible with peace, because peace is build on compromises made of grey, not only black and white. So when we speak of compromise here is the problem with religion because religion is meant to be complete truth because it comes from God. Because compromises are human, making peace is a human process. Quoting John Paul II, "Only mutual acceptance of the other, resulting in

mutual respect made more profound by love, decides the secret of humanity finally reconciled.”

A bell needs to be heard in this part of the world. Don't think there will always be Christians in the Middle East. Christians are migrating from the Middle East. If there are no Christians in the Middle East who will show the role of peace in the Middle East. Can you imagine peace in the Middle East between Moslems and Jews and no Christians? That's why the voice of people like Fr Chacour should be heard and respected because the role of Christians is of the utmost importance for achieving peace on the basis of respect and acceptance.

Now we speak about dialogue. What is dialogue? There are many schools, many interpretations of dialogue. Dialogue is an art in itself, it's the art of searching for truth from the point of view of the other. This means that when we make dialogue, we start trying to search for truth from the point of view of the other who is different, and if he is not different, he is not “more other”. I start by accepting the fact that I do not have the full truth. I can find the truth in a different point of view. Openness to differences is the culture of dialogue, the basis of dialogue. In my country of Lebanon we are a community of communities. Our way of life, of living together, is based on the principle of living with differences – not to deny it, but to accept it and live with it in respect and in love. This way of life is not accepted by other communities where they believe they have the whole truth and they are the only representatives of the truth. There is much plurality in Lebanon – there is no majority, we are all minorities. Democracy is based on this plurality and this is the only way of life that is acceptable and which can build a future. This plurality is of great importance and should be preserved and should be respected.

Now I come to the issue of how to live with Israel, which is completely different from the historical background of living with Moslems and Christians. What is the identity of Israel? I want to assure you that the Arab summit in Beirut in 2002 issued an initiative for peaceful settlement, which Israel did not accept. Last month a new summit took place and a new initiative was revised. There is some movement between the countries to promote this new initiative.

There is an Arab solution to the problem in the Middle East but the main problem is Palestinians rights on one hand and Israeli security on the other. How can we solve these two problems? There have been resolutions taken by the Security Council and other initiatives from Madrid and Oslo but there is no implementation of peace. The Arab people accept the principle of living with Israel. They said “yes” to the Security Council which said that Arab countries should recognise Israel as a State in the Middle East.

But how can we live together? It is not enough to have borders. Everywhere there are borders. Everyone wants security within walls. Israel also has a wall. This will not solve the problem. The problem will be solved with mutual understanding, respect and living together. What is the identity of Israel? Is it a Jewish identity? Is it a Zionist identity or some other identity within limited borders? What happens to the settlements of West Bank and the Gaza? What happens to the Arabs residing within Israel? Do they have equal citizenship? What role does Israel have in the Middle East? These are issues of utmost importance, which we should study carefully to find a way out. Who will find a way out? Not the religious leaders – they do not play a political role. Decision-makers reflect the will of the people. This is democracy. We have a very complicated relationship between religious leaders and the people. The religious leaders can agitate the people but the people cannot influence or play any role in the process of decision-making. That is why

there are extraordinary differences between the people and the political elite taking care of decisions.

In the long run I would like to finish by emphasising the point that no solution in the Middle East will come through religion, only through mutual understanding between the people of the Middle East and countries of the Middle East. Religious leaders can facilitate the process of achieving peace in the Middle East and they have done that in Alexandria two years ago – they made some constructive principles.

Once again I would like to pin point, the Christians of the Middle East are leaving this part of the world and numbers are decreasing so their role is becoming smaller and smaller and that's why this will affect the balance of the political, social and religious levels. That's why I really believe, as a Moslem, that the cornerstone of a real peaceful settlement and understanding in the Middle East should be played by the Christians of this part of the world and especially the Christians of Palestine, those people who became Christians before any other people all over the world and they are still there as Christians. So it is of great importance that we help these people perform their role. It is the duty of the moslem world to safeguard the presence of the Christians and to keep a necessary balance between all the communities of Middle East. All of us can play a constructive role for a better peace and future.

Thank you.