

PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Contribution of Religion to Peace in the Middle East

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It's a great honour and privilege to be with you this morning. The topic I have to deal with is a very sensitive one. It's a heavy burden for me to deal with the issues of Israel, Palestine, Judaism, and Christianity. One has the impression that whatever one might say might be controversial or might sound one-sided, or might sound like a political stand, and that can only be wrong with regards to me because I am no politician, I belong to no political party whatsoever. I respect politicians and know the implications of politics but I am none of these. That's why the best way for you to get to know the complexity of religions and the challenge that lies inside the relationship of different religions, the best way is to introduce who I am because I could sound like a walking contradiction. For many that is the case for over 70 years. I say that I am a Palestinian, a proud Palestinian who is not ashamed to be Palestinian. My mother language is Arabic. And I am a Palestinian Arab Christian and that complicates things immediately because public opinion in Palestine is that a Palestinian has to be a Moslem. A Christian cannot be a Palestinian. But to add to this picture I am a Palestinian Arab Christian who is also a citizen of Israel.

These pieces of my identity are not always at peace together. There are apparent contradictions and I will try to prioritise who I am first of all. Am I an Israeli citizen first of all? I cannot agree with this because I have a small problem with Israel. Israel is 59 years old and I am 68 years old. I am older than Israel. I did not immigrate into Israel at an early age. Israel was created in my country when I was a young man. Then I had to face many challenges like all my people. I am painting the picture in order to come to my main point, what can religions contribute to inspire politicians for some new direction that has been lost or neglected or despised. At the age the of 8 Israel was created and I became an Israeli citizen who was a member of a small minority of Palestinians who managed to stay inside the State of Israel, so I am not among the Palestinians refugees in the Arab countries. I am not part of the occupied territories. I have Israeli citizenship, and those Arab Palestinians who remain inside Israel are now 1,000,200 Palestinian Israelis. We do not question the existence of Israel, we pray for its long life. We question some qualities of that existence and we question our socio-political status as non-Jews in a Jewish State. And that's the challenge we face every day as Palestinians inside Israel.

I was not born a Christian. I was born a baby in the likeness of God. This is the core of the problem. I think the mission of Jesus Christ was to bring us back to the identity of being born children, babies in the image of the likeness of God, and I became Christian not long ago, in fact. Two thousand years ago, on the day of Pentecost when my forefathers were gathered in the upper room they received the promise of their compatriot. They received the Holy Spirit. It's the wind of God, and the wind when it's strong becomes a storm, and my forefathers were a storm with the Spirit of Jesus Christ and they started to be convinced that there is no Jew or Gentile.

Who were those forefathers of mine? Some of them are Jewish. Some of them were Greeks. Some were Romans. Some were Arabs. There was no Australian there! It is

this pluralistic society that formed the first Christian community and that's why we Christians of the Holy Land are inclined to do very little philosophy or theology – we are too busy sharing the story of the Man from Galilee and to tell the whole world we have two unique points to show you. We have an empty tomb and we have a risen man from Galilee and his story is fascinating if we take it seriously.

Being an Arab Palestinian does not impoverish my identity, on the contrary, it is enriching me with so much that I start questioning do we need to consider these affiliations as contradictions, or rather as a unique opportunity to create something new. If we want to have peace and justice not only in Israel and Palestine but all over the world, don't we need to learn how to create unity within the diversity of peoples of religious affiliations. I have met a few obstacles for that.

First, the selective reading of our holy books. Very often we try to find justification for our preconceived ideas, for our human claims and that has applied so much to the conflict that is going on and worsening between the Jewish and Palestinian people. Something is going wrong. What is it? It has never been a religious conflict – Islam against Judaism or Christianity against Judaism or vice versa. It has never been a racial conflict. It's not Semite against non-Semite. Who is more Semite – I can say humbly it is my neighbour or myself. I speak Hebrew with the accent of Abraham our Father. I have to teach many Jews how to speak it. So I am more Semite than many of my Jewish brothers and sisters. I am Semite with my blood, Semite with my education, with my culture, with my tradition, with my history, so it has never been a racial conflict. That's what we have to be convinced about. It's about the identical claims of two nations on the same territory. Our Jewish brothers and sisters say we have been in Palestine 2000 years ago. We are coming back so you go away. The Palestinians say we have been here for 2000 years and we cannot accept you without us. The problem is that Israel and the majority of the Jews want peace and security – nothing but peace and security. They have no peace and no security. I have never seen a nation so frightened as the Israeli people especially since the war in Lebanon. I wonder if things continue as they are if we will have any peace in the near future.

We Palestinians want justice, only justice, and what we have is misery, poverty, persecution, oppression, and no justice. Both Jews and Palestinians to my mind have made a major mistake. They wanted their own peace and they wanted their own justice. They did not realise that the prophets, whether Jewish, Muslim or Christian say, if you want peace and security, what do you have to do? You have to pursue justice and integrity. As long as we do not marry these two values together we will never get either of them. That is why my second book is called "We Belong to the Land". The Jew is entitled to say, I belong to the land, but not exclusively. I too belong to the land and unless we all learn how to belong to the land, maybe we have only one solution to be married together in different ways in the same land. There is no other solution. Out of this fear, out of this lack of vision for the future, on both sides, what has been done is enforcing the division, the separation, because we are unable to say, I am also right which implies the other is also right as much as I am. I have some wrongs and the other has some wrongs. The Christian community in Israel is 98% Christian Palestinians and we are Israeli citizens. We are a daily voice of moderation. We speak a language that is so much needed there in the conflict in the Middle East.

I know that the politicians almost all over the world have failed to provide humanity with peace because justice has not always been the target of their policy. They failed and what we witness today is a culture of death, culture of suspicion. You just need to go into any airport in the world to see that you are a suspect. Everyone is a potential enemy; there are dogs who sniff around to see who is bad and who is good. This culture has to be changed and to find an alternative, which is not tolerance. We Palestinians hate the policy of tolerance. We do not want to be tolerated by Israel because we never tolerate Israel. We accept Israel and we want to be accepted by Israel. Tolerance for us in the Middle East reminds us of the sort of tolerance in Europe which said, I tolerate you until I find the final solution. We want to deal with each other. We want to welcome the "otherness" of the other. What is being done in Israel is the Christian community is being recognised by the highest authorities in Israel because Christians are important to create a new vision in that conflict, which is to bring in sharing, forgiveness, reconciliation, and especially justice for all. We are not there yet, but we are trying our best.

During the last war with Lebanon ten people from my diocese were killed. Among them was an older man. I went to celebrate his funeral and a Minister from the Cabinet of Israel came to give his condolences. He entered the church with four bodyguards as all ministers do when they are outside their offices, and sat in the first pews with the soldiers around him. I could not start the prayer. I said, "Mr Minister, we Christians in our churches have a very powerful body-guard, and you have yours. They cannot go together. Either you trust ours, or you trust yours. If you trust yours go out with your bodyguard or else send your bodyguard out and stay with us. Our bodyguard will look after you. Our bodyguard is the Almighty God of Abraham, Esau and Jacob. Your bodyguard are soldiers". The soldiers went out and during the sermon I said, "Everybody is looking at the church. What side would the church take? For Hezbollah against Israel? For Israel against Hezbollah? For the Palestinians against Israel? I tell you the church will never go into any trench. We will stand between you and the trenches and we will beg you to stop killing each other and to stop competing about who will kill more people and destroy more homes. We will stand there and if you need to kill anybody, kill us. We don't need to forgive you. We've already forgiven you because we love you. If our dead are a reason for reconciliation, then we welcome the kingdom of heaven.

This is the attitude that we have adopted from the beginning since Israel was created. Politicians have to understand, as I said to the Minister of Defence, it is impossible to put our future, our hope, in military solutions. Armies and wars create more horror and terror. We need to give up military solutions because human beings can be broken but cannot become friends with weapons, with violence on both sides. Our responsibility as Christians in that part of the world is to bring an alternative to the militaristic attitude of both sides.

That's why I came here, not only to speak about this conflict but because I am a beggar. You know what a beggar is? A beggar is a man who asks for favours and I'm asking here for favours. Don't start counting the dollars you will give me. I'm not coming for money. I never beg for money. I am begging for something much more important. It is your attitude so far. If you have been for any reason the friend of Jews in Australia, a friend of Jews in Israel, even the friend of Jewish settlers in the West Bank, I beg you on behalf of Palestinian children, continue to provide friendship to

your Jewish friends – they need it much more than ever before – but please for God's sake and for the sake of the integrity of your friendship, stop interpreting that friendship as antipathy towards the Palestinians. The one should not imply the other, on the contrary. If you have been in the Middle East and have visited the Palestinian refugee camps, you saw our children who are deprived and marginalised, you saw the smile on their faces in spite of all of that, and if you decide to take our side, do it, and you will be on the right side for once! But if taking our side as Palestinians would mean to encourage the violence inside the Palestinian camps, killing people and antipathy or rejection of Jews, of Judaism and Israel then please back off, we do not need your friendship. Because being on one side against the other, you are one more enemy in a very cruel fight, and we do not need one more enemy. We do not need wars for peace. We need bridges and we invite you to be those bridges.

To be more specific, as Christians you like to visit the Holy Places and that's the normal thing. Go and visit the Holy Places, why not? Visit Jerusalem, but remember He is not here, He is risen. Get out and go to meet the risen Lord in Galilee. I can't understand Christians who go to Israel, visit the Shrines without giving half a day to meet with the local Christian community. We need your solidarity. We need you to come and see that we exist. You pray with us and you will enjoy our hospitality. If we don't have enough money to buy food for you we will go to the neighbours and borrow money to buy food for you because we love to have contact with you. Solidarity with you will strengthen us in our vision to create unity within the diversity of the population there.

I am not speaking about theoretical things. You come to my school; there you won't know who is Moslem, who is Jewish, who is Christian among my students. They are all beloved children of God. They were all born babies in the likeness and image of God. You can look at the Moslems who are the majority there, beautiful boys and more beautiful girls. Some of the girls have their head covered; others do not have their heads covered. When a terrorist killed Moslems praying my children were so scandalised they wrote to the government and said these were Nazi acts. But when two weeks later a Palestinian terrorist hit the bus station and killed 16 Jews and wounded 86 these same students were not happy, they were scandalised and decided to give their blood for the wounded Jews in Tel Aviv. Three hundred other students I had at that time in 1992 donated blood to the hospital in Haifa for the wounded Jews in Tel Aviv because they were also created in the likeness of God. Today I have hope again because Palestinian blood is flowing in Jewish veins to restore life when life was meant to be suppressed, and life is not to be suppressed.

Ladies and gentlemen, one more point then I will end with that. Please give up all collective judgement and labelling of people. There is no such thing as a nation that is right and another nation who is wrong. There is no such thing that Jews are dirty and Palestinians are terrorists. Give up this language especially using religious arguments to justify socio-political claims or national claims or territorial claims. In the Bible, even if we take only the Jewish Bible, you can find all kinds of statements even such a statement as "God does not exist", but you need to read what is before, "The foolish says, God does not exist". The same thing for the claims on the land, we must not be selective.

Thank you so much for listening.