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DAVID L. COPPOLA

Creating Space for Dialogue

People of good will cannot ignore the challenges of this moment in history. The devastating attacks of September 11, 2001, ensuing wars, continued ethnic cleansings, fundamentalist revolutions, economic oppression and cultural clashes have left the world wounded by violence.

Additionally, despite significant advances in food production and medicine, poverty and disease persist in staggering numbers. Religious people cannot stand by and disinterestedly observe these signs of the times. All of us, especially those living in wealthy countries, are contributing to these human tragedies in morally significant ways.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam teach that it is God's will that all people live in peace with each other. Peace will be adequately advanced only when religious people and religious institutions are integral to the processes of social justice in every part of the globe. It is religion that can help to reach into the depths of humanity's struggles and the heights of human accomplishments to salve such injuries. Unfortunately, dialogue for the sake of building mutual respect, understanding and ultimately, peaceful coexistence seems more difficult than ever, in part due to the resistance and obstruction by some who claim to be faithful religious adherents. Worshipers have become warriors, religious moderates have become violent radicals, and walls (both real and ideological) have replaced noble traditions of hospitality and welcome to the stranger, widow, orphan—"the other." In the face of such obstacles, it is not surprising that many have resigned themselves to pessimism, cynicism, relativism and fatalism, while others have taken up an alarming ultra-defensive posture to the extent of committing so called pre-emptive violence against "the other." What are individuals, families, religious communities or countries to do? The short, obvious and overwhelmingly complex answer is: create space for dialogue.

Without space for dialogue (both time and place) there will be one continuous cycle of violence fueled by each more recent occasion. Without dialogue, there will be no understanding, reflection or possibility for common pursuits towards the common good. Without understanding, we will risk being reduced to xenophobic, scapegoating participants in unreflective vengeance exacted out on others as if an “eye for eye” were an ethical imperative and a matter of entitlement, rather than an opportunity to show mercy and forgiveness to others, thus reducing or even stopping the cycle of violence. Without religious dialogue, the greatest sources of wisdom and inspiration for peacemaking will be removed from humanity’s hands at the very moment when God is offering them in abundance.

In a recently published book, *Mission and Place: Strengthening Learning and Community through Campus Design* (American Council on Education and Praeger, 2004), the authors, Daniel R. Kenney, Ricardo Dumont and Ginger Kenney make a convincing case for planning space on college campuses based on the university’s mission and strategic plans. In their view, buildings and spaces are deliberately created to promote learning and engage students in the pursuit of knowledge, understanding and truth. New or renovated buildings can also help to define and enhance surrounding spaces, so that several goals can be accomplished at once, such as, the creation of pathways or walkways for reflection, courtyards and small parks for reading or private conversations, beacons and landmarks for orientation and meaningful memories, sacred spaces for prayer and liturgy, and public forums for celebrations, rites of passage, lectures, discussions, concerts, art exhibits, and the like.

In many ways, the mission and plan for peace by religions is to create and coordinate time and places for dialogue, many of which already exist. A religious perspective looks to a beacon beyond a *Pax Romana*, which could be achieved by power over others while maintaining a precarious balance of forces between enemies. Admittedly, this would at least reduce some forms of violence and some instances of war. However, much like the planting of a public garden or arboretum, the alternative of slowly and deliberately finding common ground and creating space for dialogue takes reflection, planning and focused effort—and significant time to grow. (See also: B. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality*. Paulist, 1988; and B. McGraw, *Rediscovering America’s Sacred Ground*, State University of New York Press, 2003).

Whenever a religion affirms something about the Divine, it is also communicating something about its own self-understandings. For example, in the pre-history stories of the Book of Genesis, God takes the time to speak with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, dialogues with the serpent/evil (does not do violence to it), allows Abraham to negotiate for Sodom and Gomorrah (and does not appear to tire of such heckling) and guides Noah and his family to a new life. In historical illustrations, God speaks to Moses, leads the Israelites to freedom through the Red Sea, and makes a covenant with them, which includes keeping the Sabbath. The categories and language used to describe God and God's activities are profoundly self-revealing. The Abrahamic religions understand God as one who is involved in the lives of human beings and makes time to communicate and interact with humans—even to this day. Accordingly, humans have a responsibility to respond in appropriate and ethical ways to such communication and revelation, including the setting aside of a day each week for reflection, prayer and re-centering one's place in the world with others and God. Such time for renewal was also experienced in God's time, for as many as forty days or forty years. As such, a central mission of the Abrahamic religions is to create space and time to reflect, pray and repair the world by promoting ethical living in love of God and neighbor which can result in peace.

Thus, the invitation from God and the task at hand is to design and create a new landscape for peace to grow. From a global perspective, this requires that religious leaders renovate and make room in their philosophy and traditions to develop adequate theologies of "the other" as part of God's plan in this time and place. Diversity among people could be a source of strength and creativity, rather than seen as a threat to security, faithfulness or unity as some have characterized it. Also, such reflections and practices must self-critically examine whether supercessionism, aspirations to power and prestige within society, and institutionalized classicism, racism or sexism continue the cycles of oppression, injustice and violence. This re-examination and where appropriate, *teshuva*, is not to advocate relativism or a watering down of fundamental beliefs, or even to lay blame on any one group. Each religious tradition can contribute to creating a world where there is greater justice and peace, and by working together all can take small steps down the paths of reflection and action by enlarging the circles of inclusion and understanding, thus fostering peace and overcoming violence. Otherwise,

religion will continue to directly function as a dogmatic dividing force between believers and nonbelievers, thus rousing commitment from followers who are asked to participate in violence against others—usually the “different” or weak. Whether willing or even unconscious participants, all religions and their followers have been a part of the tragic human story of violence.

On the other hand, all religions have been responsible for promoting landmark moments of peace and reconciliation throughout history. In fact, the ability to break through divisions to promote dialogue through mutual cooperation in the pursuit of truth and social justice and to ask for correction or pardon where appropriate is exactly the forte of religion. Religious and theological efforts at reconciliation and peacemaking have rested on the foundational assumption of the absolute value and dignity of human life given by God. Such is still a valuable starting point in creating spaces for dialogue, but this assumption needs to be buttressed with several other elements since it is clear that many people now reject it, given their destructive acts as suicide-homicide bombers.

First, religious leaders committed to peace should work together with their own people, with those of other religious beliefs and with all people of good will to preach and teach unequivocally that by acting violently, one fails to reverence God’s gift of life given to every person and every family, including one’s own. God does not reward violence and killing with blessings. Only God has the right to give and take life, and others who presuppose such power act idolatrously. Additionally, religious voices must be raised to refute politicians and those with myopic, ideological or nationalist agendas who attempt to dull and blur the reality of violence in categories of bravery and holy war ideology purporting that the God of Abraham is a sponsor of military victories and favors the powerful and wealthy. God does not show particularity and there is nothing valiant or holy about war. Any war is a failure on the part of religion, society and humanity to find creative and life-giving solutions to fulfill their ethical duty to God and others to promote peace. Such education and admonitions can cut through the ignorance, suspicion, anger, prejudice, exaggerated fears, greed or passion of a group or individual who advocates wanton violence. Without such efforts on the part of religious leaders, human dignity, social solidarity, legal rights and due process, and the freedom to participate in self-determination and self-governance processes will be severely diminished.

Second, religious leaders can offer a strong and clear word of hope that peaceful coexistence is not a Utopian dream but a promise of God and a goal that can be achieved with planning and persistence. As God's people we are ethically bound to one another to promote the benefit of all God's creation. World days of prayer, reflection, education and celebrations of cultures are essential, as are regular national celebrations and holidays, to continually lift people's eyes, hearts and creative impulses from pessimism and negativity generated by past failures, to the beacon of mutual cooperation. Joint study trips, retreats, and pilgrimages are also life-changing experiences that create space for learning and trust.

Third, the benefits of such joint collaboration should be heralded. These include the potential to live happy and fulfilled lives filled with adequate time for reflection, religious liberty, secure space for worship, safe and respectful public interaction, and the promotion of ethical and aesthetic values.

Fourth, the overwhelming majority of Jewish, Christian and Islamic scriptural texts concern themselves with loving God and following the will of God by pursuing holiness, wisdom, justice and peace. There are also ample examples where violence is advocated. Therefore, a vital space for dialogue to occur is in joint study of texts and teachings to learn about each other and find common ground to do God's will together. One should expect and applaud the opportunity to wrestle together with interpreting difficult texts and teachings, with which people of good will are likely to disagree. Those who have engaged in such groups insist that as trust and friendships grow through such reflection, the benefits have outweighed the struggles tenfold. (See for example, Irving Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity*, Jewish Publication Society, 2004.)

Fifth, religions and religious people are important voices in the moral and cultural discourses of a nation and society. Religions have a duty to contribute to the common good by helping to shape public policy and contribute to the ethical consensus of the polis in promoting such goods as access to dignified housing, sufficient sustenance, security, freedom, law and justice, meaningful labor and leisure, volunteerism, mutual respect, and the promotion of cultural treasures such as art, drama, music and food—none of which can take place in a society ruled by fear, injustice and violence.

Similar to religious leaders, national leaders and educators have an opportunity to demonstrate and advocate the benefits of peace. Those with political, economic or military power must model reflection, patience, prudence and wisdom, doing everything possible to promote the best of human impulses and decisions through genuine dialogue, respect, and the sharing of power and resources for the common good. Poverty, injustice, unemployment, oppression, disease, discrimination, and non-access to necessary resources poison efforts at building peaceful societies. Further, a society is placed in jeopardy by those who glorify or promote violence for selfish or ideological reasons.

Many exemplary groups are working to bring peace through justice by sharing in common political, cultural, economic, environmental, medical, philosophical, ethical, and educational pursuits. These excellent efforts help to cultivate and celebrate the human spirit. In particular, there is need for creation and dissemination of more educational forums dedicated to teaching peace. Universities have an important role to play in this regard in responding to the challenge of peace. There is need for wider communication of a world curriculum for peace to promote learning and engage students in the pursuit of knowledge, understanding and truth. Such a platform is possible with the present technology but also requires resources for actual face to face contact and relationship-building. In this way people can be drawn together in scholarly, educational, social, legislative, and humanistic concerns, while promoting unity by helping to overcome religious, gender, class, ethnic, cultural, and geographical prejudices.

One such concerted effort is the Global Ethic Foundation in Tübingen, Germany, which was inspired by Hans Kung's 1990 book, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*. The Global Ethic Foundation (www.global-ethic.org) fosters inter-cultural and inter-religious research, education and encounter through its programs and publications. One cultural exhibit, "World Religions, Universal Peace, Global Ethic," has been seen around the globe and invites viewers to explore the spectrum of world religions to have a better understanding of the importance of their ethical messages for present-day society. Dr. Kung summarizes the challenge appropriately: "No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. No dialogue between the religions without global ethical standards. No survival of our globe without a global ethic."

Recent discoveries of science and mathematics clearly demonstrate that it is statistically impossible for every person on the planet not to be related. We are all cousins. And yet, peace and justice cannot be achieved by such rational demonstrations or abstract theological explanations alone. It is regrettable that religions have initiated, acquiesced, or ignored violence perpetrated in the name of God. Only by a gradual building of trust and understanding through friendships and relationships, living in the same neighborhoods, participating in cultural and civic pursuits to improve the common good, teaching respectfully about the other, and discussing the religious beliefs that are dear to each, will secure progress occur.

Cooperation, respect, and dialogue can be the new foundations for the future of ethical and peaceful action. Each effort at dialogue or renovation of former ideas about the other will help to define and enhance the surrounding theological and cultural spaces, so that more progress will be achieved than immediately apparent. Religions and religious people have an essential obligation to future generations to create this vital space for peaceful coexistence. It requires reflection, dialogue, patience, prayer, listening to and learning from others, working with others, and the courage to act justly, humbly walking before God. By faithfully sharing such convictions with our children, neighbors, and those of good will, we will help to create the sacred space for dialogue that will one day soon spring forth in justice and peace.