



Viewpoint

Religio-Political Tensions In The World

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In his classic work, *The Clash of Civilizations*, Harvard professor Samuel Huntington asserts that the causes of conflict between Islam and the West lie in fundamental questions of power and culture. Who is to rule? Who is to be ruled? What further complicates these relations is the differing perspectives of what is right and what is wrong and, thus, who is right and who is wrong.

The religio-political conflict is not limited, however, to Islam and the West. Take, for example, fifteenth-century Spain, when national authorities forced Jews from the country. In seventeenth-century Colonial America, new arrivals were required to adhere to a particular religious persuasion in order to gain land, hold office, or be eligible for government services. And, in eighteenth-century Ireland, English penal laws forbade Irish Catholics “to receive education, to enter a profession, to hold public office, to engage in trade or commerce, to live in a corporate town or within five miles of one, to own a horse of greater value than five pounds, to purchase or lease land, to vote, to attend Catholic worship, or be a guardian to a child, or leave a child under Catholic guardianship.”

Concerning more recent times, former U. S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright writes:

In China, authorities saddled with an obsolete ideology of their own are struggling to prevent burgeoning religious and spiritual movements from becoming a political threat. India’s identity as a secular society is under challenge by Hindu nationalists....In Israel, Orthodox religious parties are seeking more influence over laws and society. Secular Arab nationalism, once thought to embody the future, has been supplanted by a resurgent Islam extending beyond Arab lands to Iran, Pakistan, central and southeast Asia, and parts of Africa....A reawakening of Christian activism is also altering how we think about politics and culture here in the United States....Even in Europe, which seems otherwise exempt from the trend toward religious growth, the number of observant Muslims is rising quickly....

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Sources of World Religio-Political Tensions

One source of religio-political tensions is the unleashing of pathologies found within individuals—pathologies fostered by attitudes of haugh-



tininess, self-absorption, narrow-mindedness, ethnocentrism, power-mongering, and God-complexes. The temptation develops within those once of noble ideals to act using means of intimidation rather than by inspiration. Irrationality of thought is exacerbated where the stakes are high, and nowhere are the stakes higher than in policymaking or vying for the hearts and minds of individuals.

Consider the following examples—the first is one in which pathologies of a nation went unchecked. In his book, *Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a young German theologian, spoke of his government's extremism, and challenged the religious community and conscience of his day to stand with the Jews against Nazi Germany's extremism. Few responded to that call. The second case, excesses committed by a community of faith, begged for greater presence and protection by government officials on behalf of the members of the People's Temple Full Gospel Church. In 1977, lay pastor Jim Jones relocated his church to Guyana to avoid government scrutiny. And, although U. S. Congressman Leo Ryan personally visited Jonestown to look into alleged abuses of church members, over nine hundred of Jones's followers were forced to participate in a murder-suicide on November 18, 1978, drinking Kool-Aid laced with cyanide. Displays of pathological behaviors continue to be both startling and unexpected.

A second cause of religio-political tensions is that of misunderstandings. With our limited human knowledge, we are prone to misread the intents of others. The following historical account is a prime illustration of this point.

In the course of time, the king of the Ammonites died, and his son Hanun succeeded him as king. David [king of Israel] thought, "I will show kindness to Hanun son of Nahash, just as his father showed kindness to me." So David sent a delegation to express his sympathy to Hanun concerning his father.

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When David's men came to the land of the Ammonites, the Ammonite nobles said to Hanun their lord, "Do you think David is honoring your father by sending men to you to express sympathy? Hasn't David sent them to you to explore the city and spy it out and overthrow it?" So Hanun seized David's men, shaved off half of each man's beard, cut off their garments in the middle at the buttocks, and sent them away. When David was told about this, he sent messengers to meet the men, for they were greatly humiliated....

When the Ammonites realized that they had become a stench in David's nostrils, they hired twenty thousand Aramean foot soldiers from Beth Rehob and Zobah, as well as the king of Maacah with a thousand men, and also twelve thousand men from Tob. On hearing this, David sent Joab out with the entire army of fighting men.

The Ammonite king's wrongful interpretation of King David's peaceful expressions proved disastrous. Since interpersonal misunderstandings such as these naturally occur between individuals, it should come as no surprise that different understandings, interpretations, and approaches argued concerning growing uncertainties in this world are inherent between religious and political powers.

The third and, I believe, most basic reason that religio-political tensions exist today is that neither religions nor politics are living up to their high calling or intended purpose.

As part of their foundational beliefs, all religions advocate tolerance for others—esteeming, even loving, their neighbor as themselves; all faiths subscribe to doctrines of unity and peace and regularly promote an "other world" focus, acknowledging that this earth offers only temporary gains, rewards, and honor.

Like religion, most modern nation-states advocate noble principles: that individuals have God-given rights which no human entity can compromise or



withhold irrespective of social, geographic, or political status; that governments accept checks on their powers so as not to exceed their authority; and that most subscribe to “the rule of law”—reliance on formalized, written law rather than the arbitrary discretion of some government authority.

Regrettably, government has moved away from its glorious intent. Rather than carrying out inspired ideals, today’s politicians have come to measure national success in terms of maintaining a robust economy. Also, state leaders seem to be more concerned with what satisfies the constituents—what political scientist Herbert Simon refers to as “satisficing”—rather than with what is the right thing to do.

Religion too has failed to live up to its noble standards. Communities of faith react with disdain to modernization which, they believe, ushers in the secularization of society. Using a confrontational approach, religious groups enter the political arena, thinking to mandate morality, ostracizing or applying force to the noncompliant.

In One Accord

In the 21st century, tensions have escalated between religion and politics because neither seems capable of addressing the growing disparities and complexities in this world—economic, political, and societal. Solutions intended to resolve the difference have, for the most part, failed. Isolating those with pathologies, attaching negative labels to dissenters, or threatening attacks on aggressor groups—all techniques commonly employed—are counterproductive, only exacerbating extremist behaviors. Thoughtful, considerate treatment is more likely to prevail and may even convince those with pathological behaviors to join the sane side of the equation.

Granted, there are no simple answers for crafting bridges between powers of governments and religions, and yet the dividends to be derived from making a commitment to develop lasting, mean-

ingful relationships cannot be underestimated. However, the most critical, first step for resolving tensions is a return by faith communities and nation-states to their authentic, high purpose.

Conclusion

We have a tendency to relegate these relationship-building efforts to some authority other than ourselves—to the pastor, rabbi, or imam; to the president, secretary of state, or parliament. But we, as citizens of earth and followers of the King, must visualize the part we might play in miti-

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gating world, national, community tensions, practicing peace in our own lives. The prophet Jeremiah spoke in these terms. After detailing the account that God’s people were being taken into captivity by the Babylonians because of all the evil they had done, God then directs that the people “pray for the city to which I send you for if it prospers you too will prosper” (Jeremiah 29:7). No less in our days than in the days

of Jeremiah, God asks those of us within communities of faith to pray for our governments. This instruction is accompanied by God’s resolute assurance that we too will prosper.

*God’s plan made a hopeful beginning;
But man spoiled his chances by sinning;
We trust that the story will end in God’s glory;
Though, at present, the other side’s winning.*