

Religions for Peace

It has almost become a cliché that we live in a “global village”. Forty years ago we could see the first picture of the blue planet taken from the moon – a picture that in a moment illustrated how close we are to one another in the endless cosmos. With all our differences, we are obliged to take care of our common home and of each other. Making religions an instrument of peace is indeed one essential way of making the world a better home for all.

Let us for a moment zoom in on planet earth and land on a few spots and see what they tell us about *religions for peace*.

Mumbai. It is early morning, Thursday, November 27, 2008. I have just landed at the international airport, wondering why large crowds are thronged around the big television monitors. Even though I do not understand the language, I realize that a catastrophic event is taking place in the city. In the day I spend at the airport, I follow the fierce battle between the terrorists and the commando soldiers.

Soon it becomes obvious that the terrorists are launched from neighboring Pakistan and are linked to Islamist extremists. Around me are mostly Hindus and Sikhs, but I can also notice people whose dresses reveal their Muslim identity. It is not difficult to imagine how they feel at this moment, and I even imagine that they try to make themselves as unnoticed as possible. And in the days to follow, I hear and read statements about Muslims that are certainly not promoting *religions for peace*.

Cochin. I continue in the late evening from Mumbai to this city on the southwest coast of India. Exhausted after a long journey and a turbulent day I fall asleep immediately and wake up early the next day to take my first steps in “real” India. Only after a few blocks, something in one of the shop-windows catches my interest and makes me enter. A poster depicts side by side Jesus, the Hindu deity Ganesha, and Qaba in Mekka, surrounded by a sura from the Qur’an in beautiful Arabic calligraphy. The poster just radiates harmony and there is no indication whatsoever that one religion is superior to the other.

I have never seen a multi-religious illustration such as this before, and when I enter, yet another world religion enters the stage, at least indirectly. When I introduce myself to the owner of the shop and he tells me his name – Abd al-Latif – I realize that his holy language is that of the Qur’an, and then I tell him that I come from *Al-Quds* – “The Holy [City]”, i.e. Jerusalem in Arabic. Hardly have I mentioned Jerusalem before he asks me whether I want to visit the Jewish quarter. I tell him that in fact I am trying to find it. “Then you have to visit Sarah Cohen”, he tells me, and gives me an excellent description how to find one of the few remaining Jews in Cochin. “Wish her a good Sabbath from me”, Abd al-Latif tells me as I return to the street.

I needed this healing encounter after the depressing day before. And when I enter Sarah Cohen's little shop some hour later, my impression of stepping on holy ground in this crowded, noisy and almost chaotic multi-cultural place is reinforced. Sarah is happy to receive greetings from her friend Abd al-Latif, and then she starts telling her story and the history of one of the oldest Jewish communities on earth, which may go back all the way to King Solomon three thousand years ago and at least to the Babylonian captivity in the sixth century b.c.e.

What is special for this long chapter in Jewish history is that antisemitism was an unknown malady on the Indian continent until it was exported from Europe through the Portuguese conquistadores in the sixteenth century. This raises fundamental questions, pertaining to our topic *religions for peace*. How come that I have to go to the highly multi-religious city of Cochin on India's Malabar coast to discover a place characterized by such a religious harmony?

Singapore. I am invited to lecture at Trinity College and arrive earlier than expected. Therefore, I happen to be received by a person who does not know who I am. He introduces himself as Professor Tilak, and as soon as he learns that I am Swedish, he becomes very interested and overwhelmingly friendly. As I was wondering why my being Swedish awakes such warm feelings, he tells me: "You see, I come from South India, and it was Swedish missionaries who brought us the Christian gospel." So in his eyes I represent a nation who has given him and his people the faith that was fundamental in his life. He was aware of the roots of his faith. Hence, there was a natural and very positive connection between us through the religion.

It is not to be taken for granted that such a dependence of the younger on the older always leads to affection and gratitude. History seems rather to demonstrate the opposite: The younger tend to try dispossessing the older and taking their place. Replacement theology is a common disease among religions and denominations who are close to one another and who share the same root system. The fact that Professor Tilak was so much aware of the connection between his church and mine is due to the closeness in time. It was merely a few decades since Christianity reached his people in South India. I wonder whether the next generation will at all be aware of the same connection and look upon Sweden with the same eyes any longer. In the same way I am convinced that the first Gentile Christians were aware of the fact that "salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22), but it did not take long until Jews and Christians rather looked upon one another as opposites.

Let us try to translate my Singapore experience into the relation between the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. They are certainly close because of their belief in one God and their holy scriptures. We could, perhaps, use the image of the world religions as a huge highway with many lanes. Some are next to one another, while others are more remote. We could, for example, say that the monotheistic religions are in lanes close to one another. But it is perhaps even more appropriate to think of Judaism, Christianity and Islam as being in one and the same lane, since one has grown out of the other

or at least share the same roots. To use our traffic metaphor: When Christianity emerged, there was already another vehicle ahead – Judaism. And soon another vehicle would appear in the back mirror – Islam.

Like all images, even this does not entirely cover reality, but at least it may serve to illustrate a problem of interreligious relations. We may assume that the closer and the more similar we are, the easier are the relations between us. However, among others my Cochin experience makes me question this. Even the next place reminds us that such an assumption may be premature.

Jerusalem. Jerusalem has been my home for a significant part of my life, and I love it! However, when speaking about *religions for peace*, Jerusalem may not be the best place to illustrate the ideal situation. In fact, Jerusalem may rather serve to underline our thesis: The closer we are, the more complicated our relations may be. In addition, we have the problem of religions who relate to one another in terms of older and younger, whether we chose to depict them as parents-children or as older and younger siblings. Sibling rivalry is common. It seems also to be a rule on highways that a vehicle ahead is frequently regarded as an obstacle to pass, while vehicles in different lanes are easier to tolerate.

Is this the reason why there was never any rivalry between Judaism and Hinduism? They are simply so different that they do not pose a threat to the own identity. They are in totally different lanes. The same is true for Islam in relation to Hinduism during most of history. Judaism, Christianity and Islam, on the other hand, have been marked by religious rivalry. The testy relation between the siblings is rather rule than exception. Replacement theology, the urge of overtaking the vehicle ahead, has marred the relations between the three until today. This certainly applies to the ecumenical relations between the older and younger church traditions as well.

Three “s-words” characterize interreligious relations in Jerusalem: similarity, status quo and *sovlanut* (the Hebrew word for “tolerance”). Even though the various religious traditions are indeed very similar, we can hardly say that the religious relations are warm. Status quo – don’t change anything, don’t touch me – is rather the attitude. Tolerance seems to be the ultimate goal – bearing rather than sharing. “Tolerance” in Hebrew has to do with the verb *saval*, “carry”, and the noun *sevel*, the meaning of which is something between “burden” and “suffering”. Hence, the others are frequently viewed as people to endure rather than to embrace. The only time I can remember that the top representatives of the three monotheistic religions in Jerusalem could gather around a table in harmony was when it was about condemning a planned gay parade. This is hardly a good example of *religions for peace*.

Here and now. The last stop on our odyssey is right where we are. Soon we will go back to the contexts in which we are supposed to be instruments of *religions for peace*. Several times during this conference we have addressed the problem of religious pluralism and particularity and the need of embracing and appreciating the diversity between us. The world is one. Creation is one. Every human being reflects the image of its Creator.

Hence, every religion needs to give ample space to a universal theology of creation, where every human being is treated with dignity irrespective of his and her religious, cultural and political affiliation. Such a universal approach does not contradict the particular revelation that each religion has received. The business of interreligious dialogue is certainly not to find a least common denominator and to diminish or deny what gives us our special religious identity. We are here to realize our own limitations when we meet the others. We are here to become more humble and curious about what we can learn about God through other peoples' experience of him.

With all our particularities we must never forget that they are nothing but particular and are not supposed to be universal. And we are definitely not supposed to force them upon others or make claims towards the others in the name of our own holy texts and traditions.

One who understood this was Abraham. He had received the promise of the land (Gen 12:1). However, this promise did not imply that he would be the sole inheritor of the land. He had hardly received the promise when we receive the reminder: "And the Canaanites were then in the land" (Gen 12:6). Moreover, in the next chapter the first "Middle East war" breaks out: "And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abraham's cattle and the herdsmen of Lot's cattle" (Gen 13:7). In this situation Abraham did not use the revelation he had just received to defend his own rights. On the contrary, he suggests a "two-state solution" and even gives the first choice to Lot: "If you will take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if you depart to the right hand, then I will go to the left... Then Lot chose for himself all the plain of Jordan" (Gen 13:8-13).

This is indeed a model example of the humility that is the precondition of *religions for peace*. If there is to be a competition on the highway of religions, this is the only one – competition in humility. Paul writes: "Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor" (Rom 12:10). Literally he says, "In showing honor be the first!"

The former dean of Harvard Divinity School and Bishop of Stockholm, Krister Stendahl, taught us three stages of interreligious relations: First to discover and rejoice at the similarities between us. Then to discover the differences between us without getting frustrated and beginning to smooth over those differences but trying to understand and accept them. The highest stage is what can be called the "holy envy", i.e. getting to know other religions and discovering aspects in them that make us envious. However, we do not claim them as ours but we rejoice at them, share them with others and use them to speak well about the others. With Krister Stendahl's own words: "Holy envy rejoices in the beauty of the others... We will never have good relations without an element of holy envy." This is what Metropolitan Isidore Battikha at this conference has expressed as "discovering diamonds" in other religions. Only the one trained in religious humility will discover and acknowledge such diamonds.

In these days (March 27) the first professor of theology of religions in Sweden has been inaugurated at the University of Lund. Professor Jesper Svartvik is the first holder of the "Krister Stendahl chair of Theology of Religions". According to Professor Svartvik's own definition, "theology of religions" implies "the scholarly study of the foreign policy of the religions", i.e., the examination of how people belonging to various faith communities reflect

on religious pluralism and how they relate to people who identify themselves with other religious traditions. “The other”, is he my enemy (whom I must oppose), or is she an acquaintance (whom I greet politely when we meet in the street a few times a year), or is he a friend (whom I enjoy meeting and whom I consult in times of need), or is she perhaps to be likened to a family member?

In his inaugural lecture on “Joseph in the three monotheistic religions”, Professor Svartvik concludes (according to my free condensed translation from the Swedish manuscript):

In Gen 45:4 Joseph addresses his brothers in the following way: “I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt.” We find here three short statements that can almost serve as a theological program of action:

1. “I am Joseph ...” – Let the others define themselves!

Krister Stendahl often stressed that a basic rule in religious dialogue must be: “Let the others define themselves!” A fundamental mistake in history has been that the others have been described in such a way that they were never able to recognize themselves. Let the others introduce themselves. Listen to their story!

2. “... your brother ...” – Do not underestimate the kinship!

A second step is to remember the kinship between various faith traditions. So much unites Jews, Christians and Muslims. At the same time it is important not to describe this affinity merely as a communion of opinions. There is something else that is even more important – a communion of brothers and sisters. Siblings can be very similar or different. However, this is not what decides whether they are brothers and sisters or not.

3. “... whom you sold into Egypt” – Address also difficult questions!

There are special problems in interreligious relations, particularly difficult questions and specific events in history, which may be even traumatic. All these painful memories of humiliations, expulsions and persecutions Jews, Christians and Muslims bring to the table and they must not be hidden under the table and swept under the carpet. In the long run they cannot be avoided.

For centuries we have tried the alternative of respectful dialogue. We know whence it has led us: into a blind alley of contempt, condemnations, demonizing and destruction. Therefore, it is such a joyful event when Jews, Christians and Muslims – perhaps more today than ever in history – are able to meet in order to get to know and respect one another.

At last I want to share a “diamond” – this time from Jewish tradition. The synagogue service concludes with the Kaddish prayer, the final words of which is the prayer *Oseh shalom* – in short, “May the One who makes peace in heaven bring this peace down to us.” We may be reminded of the Christian prayer “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” During this prayer the worshiper takes three steps back. It took years until I noticed this, and when I did I asked why.

There may be many different answers, but the one I remember best is this: We need to step back in order to see the face of the other. Indeed, it is necessary to see the face and look into

the eyes of the other in order to make peace. When we see the face of another human being, we should see two things: First, the reflection of *God* – the divine features of our fellow human being, created in the image of God. Secondly, the reflection of *yourself*. We need to realize how similar we are beyond our different identities. We need to see our own needs and hopes in the face of the one you encounter whoever that is. “You shall love your neighbour because he/she is like you are yourself” – this is the best translation of the commandment of love.

Then I remember another answer as to why taking the steps back when praying for peace: When we humbly step back, we create space between us. And that space is important, because only then there is space for the peace that is the theme of this conference.

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