

From Dialogue to Solidarity: Encountering God and One Another

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THERE IS NO PATH to peace for Muslims and Jews without engaging our religious traditions, because our aspirations for what it means to be human are expressed through religion. Islam and Judaism are ripe for a fruitful encounter, as both feature traditions of learning, centrality of law, and centuries of philosophical, ethical, and mystical legacies. The devotion to our scriptures, both seen to be sites of God's self-revelation in creating a polyvalent text, is another opportunity for shared reflection.

To find a path to peace among Muslims and Jews, a path rooted in justice, we must develop a twin set of ethical standards from within our own traditions: first, acknowledge the fullness of humanity in all of us. Second, develop the ability to engage in serious self-criticism. All of our traditions — Muslim, Christian, and Jewish — contain violence toward the "other" as well as beautiful and sublime examples of the highest ethics. The urge to criticize the other for their shortcomings, particularly when the wrongs have been directed toward us, is a human one, and all too familiar. Are we willing to face the ugliness in our own hearts, in our own communities, and yes, inside our own tradition, with the same openness? This is a great challenge.

We all know that we must engage the issue of Palestine-Israel openly, honestly, critically, self-critically, and compassionately. Our beginning point should be the ultimate act of humility, of being silent and listening attentively to the other's point of view, whether it is the joyous theme of return to a homeland or the agonizing exile from that same land. We should listen to the fear, anxiety, and resentment of the Israeli mother who wants her teenagers to be at a café without fear and to the tearful plea of the Palestinian mother who wants her children to grow up in a world where honor and dignity are not dependent on martyrdom. There is something redemptive about projecting the Thou into the I and the I into the Thou.

My hope is that by acknowledging the full humanity of others we can also get back in touch with our own humanity, a humanity that we are perpetually in danger of losing when our hearts are overcome with fear and

hatred. And if we can wed that humanity to a self-critical perspective when Muslims criticize suicide bombings and Jews criticize the atrocities of the Israeli Defense Force, we might be on to something.

One should be clear about the goal of a Muslim-Jewish encounter. We are often told that we should strive to become more "tolerant" citizens, develop more tolerant forms of Islam and Judaism. I respectfully disagree; tolerance is but a first step. The origins of the word "tolerance," in medieval pharmacology and toxicology, deal with how much poison a body can "tolerate" before it succumbs to the poisonous substance. Is this our notion of dialogue? Is it about how much of Muslims (or Jews) we can tolerate before it kills us?

Nor is "peace" sufficient reason to keep talking. Peace alone is not enough. The path to peace can only take shape on the solid ground of justice. Like all other high human ideals, peace has been appropriated, at times, to justify agendas of domination. Our definition of peace must go beyond the "absence of fighting" and insist as well on eliminating injustice in the world. I call us to pluralism and solidarity — pluralism in the sense that one should respect and engage not just our commonalities (monotheism, legal systems, Abraham), but also our particularities and differences. Our distinctions matter; they too are blessed.

The emphasis on solidarity is also key. We are called to do more than break bread and read common scripture; we must work together in solidarity, alleviating the suffering of others, healing this oft-broken world. The conflicts in the Middle East are today — along with the divide between the world's wealthy northern and penniless southern countries and the AIDS crisis — the world's major moral quagmires. As Martin Luther King reminded us so often, peace is not an abstract goal we seek, but the very path that we choose to get there. May we all be instruments of God's will, a God who desires peace for all of creation and who abhors injustice. As Muslims and Jews, this God we know, and it is by following this just and loving God that we seek to reshape human communities all over the world. Toward that peace, rooted in justice, we rise up today.

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