

BETWEEN TRANSCENDENCE AND HISTORY

Introductory Statement at the International Seminar on The Future of Mankind and Cooperation among Religions

by

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It is my very great pleasure to welcome all of you to this international seminar on the future of mankind and co-operation among religions. The United Nations University has the privilege of co-sponsoring this meeting with the World Conference on Religion and Peace and the Japan Foundation for the United Nations University, and we are most grateful to these two bodies for the fruitful co-operation we have enjoyed in bringing about this event.

The French philosopher and statesman, Andre Malraux, predicted that the twenty-first century would be a religious century - or that humankind would not survive to witness the twenty-first century. Without necessarily sharing his apocalyptic vision, I would surely agree that few factors could be more important in shaping the future of mankind. Religion has been somewhat pushed aside in the first part of the twentieth century by the ascendancy of humanism, so-called rationalism, science, and the great secular ideologies of this era. But religion is rapidly recovering the place it held in centuries past, recognized as one of the great motive forces in human history.

In a great many parts of the world today, a heightening of religious intensity can be observed. I feel that this is in part a reaction to the exclusively materialistic orientation of the major competing ideologies of the twentieth century; a reaction to both the aspiration and the fruits of developmentalism. Our societies are afflicted by economic inequity and instability, ecological deterioration, the continuation of violent conflict and the ever present dread of nuclear annihilation. The fact that these ills, as well as a deep spiritual malaise, beset even the most affluent, industrially and technologically advanced societies demonstrates that material well being does not necessarily lead to a satisfactory state of being. Is it not the responsibility of religion to articulate humankind's longing for a sense of meaning and higher purpose, and to point out alternative pathways toward the satisfaction of this longing?

The separation of religion and government is one tenet of political democracy that has taken hold in many parts of the world - especially in multi-ethnic countries where adherents of different religions must co-exist. Of course, there are also religiously based states, and especially in the Islamic world the idea of the religious state has passionate adherents. Some part of the resurgence of religious intensity in the political sphere springs, I believe, from the perception that the separation of religion and government has led to a banishment of religiously based values from the operation of the state, often leading to a divorce between ethics and policy.

The question that concerns me most as we begin this seminar of leaders from many different religions is this: how, in a period of growing religious intensity, can religions heal the breach between ethics and policy without opening the door to the abuse of religion for political purposes, and without introducing dogmatism, zealotry and intolerance into a social fabric already rent with conflict? How is it possible for religions to co-operate in the effort to achieve a more moral and satisfying society while each tries to deepen and pursue its own vision of the ultimate good?

In examining these questions I think it is important first of all to recognize that a religion is many things. A religion is a path toward individual salvation, redemption or enlightenment, a vehicle to carry the believer toward transcendent truth. Almost by definition, a religion is a kind of cosmology, a carrier of notions of order and rectitude. At the same time it is a major element of the cultural identity of a people. In many societies, a religion is also a mighty establishment, closely tied to the other political, economic and social institutions of society. A religion may be an agent of change and mobilization, or immobilization, of communities of people. At both the societal and the individual level, religion is a source of moral and ethical values, a guide to doing what is right. Among these dimensions, it is important to identify those in which co-operation among religions is necessary, desirable and possible.

Communication among religions is the most important step towards co-operation. The adherents of each religion may deepen their own reflection on the nature of transcendent truth by exposure to the beliefs of others. The realization that there are multiple ways of seeing and expressing truth is often the starting point of tolerance as well as humility. Much the same might be said of religions as major elements of cultural identity. Communication within a framework of mutual tolerance permits a flowering of spirituality such as is envisioned in the Qu'ran,

which says that the purpose of diversity is to stimulate people to "compete in goodness."

It is religion in its more worldly aspects - as an establishment, a source of values, and a mobilizing force - that has repeatedly led men and women to violent conflict throughout history, and continues to do so today. Co-operation among religions in these spheres may indeed be a prerequisite to the survival of humankind. We might add to this co-operation within religions as well, for the multiple roles and manifestations of a single religion are often in conflict with each other: the established church and the liberation theologian for example; the Sunni and the Shia; the mystic who longs for transcendence and the social worker who is determined to correct injustice in the here and now.

As claimants to ultimate truth, religions have a dominant concern that in part stands outside of history: our perceptions, our understanding may change with time, but truth is eternal. God is unchanging, by whatever name gods may be called. However, while truth is eternal, religion is also historical, embedded in the turmoils and imperfections of human events. Religion does not simply co-exist with history. It challenges, it shapes history. It often tries to bend history to its own precepts. It fires passions, and sometimes guns, in pursuit of secular power as well as power over the souls of men and women. It is this relationship between the ahistorical and the historical role of religions, between the transcendent and the mundane in human life, that concerns me most, and I hope you will permit me to dwell on it briefly.

Rapid change, which is perhaps the central feature of our times, aggravates the tension between the transcendental and the societal concerns of religion. Rapid change leads to a sharp increase in the number of challenges to standards of moral behaviour and conduct which have, over time, grown up around established religions in particular historical settings. The identification of religions with the standards of a particular time may strengthen the inclination to see the problems associated with social change as simple moral problems - or even to see change itself as immoral. The danger of conflict, violence and reaction rises when a religion loses its ability to respond creatively to change and to express its unchanging transcendent truth in an idiom that is meaningful in the contemporary setting. Religious believers are compelled to ponder the meaning of the changes they experience and their own conduct in new situations, from the perspectives of their faith. A religion fails its believers when it speaks to them in terms that are relevant only to the past. Worse, it may leave them

mired in bewilderment, frustration and despair that may lead them to reactionary traditionalism, to violence, or alienate them from their religion altogether. In other words, the difficulties in coping with rapid social change may result in a religion losing influence and becoming irrelevant, or to serious social rigidities which compound the already complex process of social transformation. Religion however contains within itself the authority to re-interpret and to reorder values and goals, to rearrange norms and to convey structures of meaning that people need in order to make sense of their lives. If, then, a religion develops through its leaders an adequate comprehension of the processes of change, it can then play an important role in providing a meaningful sense of direction, while maintaining the cohesion of society.

It is obvious that no religion can maintain its vigour if it avoids coming to grips with the profound changes and the attendant problems that are taking place throughout the world in the social, economic, political and technological spheres. There is a growing awareness that poverty and injustice cannot be overcome by charity alone. Increased understanding of the nature and origin of poverty and the structures that perpetuate injustice brings religion face to face with the perplexities of power and the complexities of transforming unjust institutions - of which, in a particular setting, an established church or clerical institution may be one.

Social movements designed to reform or transform economic and political structures, no matter how morally pristine their motivations, are historically defined. They bear the imprint of their leaders' personalities, of their specific geographical and social settings. They have their own inner contradictions and their own cycles of inspiration, complacency and decay. No social movement is permanent. Therefore, a religion cannot and should not be fully identified with a social movement. Nevertheless, religions are called upon to be a part of - indeed to instigate - morally justifiable change. They must recognize and reinforce the moral impulses that drive change, and stand against the immoral. But how can they be so deeply involved in social change without setting up particular social or political movements as new - and false - religions?

It is the responsibility of religious leaders to speak out clearly on ethical issues, which do have a high political content. However, it is wrong for a religious institution to anoint any political party, group or individual as the sole bearer of the right answers to political questions. It is the proper role of religions to articulate moral positions. Beyond this, however, religions must mediate among the often conflicting

demands of public order and social change by relating these to an ethical framework that transcends the particular issues and passions of the day. In so doing, some religions will have to abandon their traditional role as legitimizers of established authority and instead become the moral counselors of a difficult and tempestuous process of change.

The attempt to reunite ethics and policy from a renewed awareness of the religious significance of history is noble and necessary, but it is also fraught with the dangers of dogmatism, intolerance and absolutism. The exercise of religious conviction in the temporal sphere can - and has - led to the most merciless fanaticism. In order to avoid these dangers, the process of moral reasoning must be clearly articulated, and a profound appreciation of the boundaries between religious judgement and political judgement must be cultivated. Very often, political judgement simply means taking moral judgement one step farther - but the possible directions for that one step are almost infinite. It is essential for the person who is trying to think and act morally to realize that there are many different, valid ways of translating a particular moral judgement into a political act. Zealotry and bigotry begin when only one way is accorded moral legitimacy. Religious leaders have a major responsibility to see that the energy and inspiration of believers does not flow into these dark and narrow channels.

Let us consider one broad example. Many, if not most, religious people would agree to take a moral stance against poverty. Some of us may believe with utter conviction that the capitalist system generates poverty. To such people, to oppose poverty means to oppose capitalism. To oppose poverty is a moral judgement. To oppose capitalism is a political judgement proceeding from the moral judgement. Another person may proceed from the same moral judgement to the opposite political conclusion. Two such people may oppose each other on political grounds but they would be wrong to label each other immoral, thereby damaging the possibilities for dialogue and co-operation.

The possibility of co-operation among religions depends on an ability to agree on basic moral principles, and on willingness to respect each believer's way of trying to translate moral judgement into social reality. Let us thus agree to work against poverty and injustice, for peace, for responsible stewardship of the earth, each through our chosen channels, together if possible - but, if not, separately.

Beyond any commitment to specific changes, no religion can escape the obligation to try to reduce as much as possible the human cost of change. This implies an abhorrence of violence,

and an insistence on tolerance, civility, due process, democratic procedures, the rule of law, and human rights.

The problems of society - of social, political, economic and technological change - are not problems of ultimate truth. Our approach to them may and should proceed from our moral conviction but we should not approach them dogmatically. What our religious beliefs should equip us with is a heightened capacity for moral reasoning - that is, an ability to put religious perceptions to the test of evolving situations, and to derive new modes of action to replace those that have lost their meaning and effectiveness. Here lies the constant challenge for religion with its passionate absolutisms in an age of social transformation. It must provide a structure of meaning that reaches beyond politics and yet relates to present reality; it must link human ethical responsibilities and moral purposes to an active role in the making of history; and it must teach the humility of mind and spirit that is so much needed in a period of rapid and unpredictable change.

For centuries, the great religions have taught the essential oneness of the human race. That transcendent perception of our common humanity seems to have waned, but a co-operative effort among religions has the power to reawaken it. The moral common ground among religions is broad enough to permit a co-operative challenge to the enormous problems that threaten to overwhelm humankind and indeed all of God's creation on this planet. The spiritual common ground among religions is probably far greater still, had we but the power and the inspiration to perceive it.