

Reconciling a Painful Past with a Hopeful Future

Joint peace statement issued by HRH Prince El Hassan bin Talal and Rabbi Awraham Soetendorp as a contribution to the book "Die Macht der Würde" (The power of dignity), edited by Christoph Quarch, Silke Lechner and Peter Spiegel, Cologne 2007.

As members of the faith community we salute the uniqueness of every human being and celebrate our manifold differences. We believe that all of creation is organically and spiritually interconnected, as expressed in the Islamic concept of *Tawhid*, or the essential Unity of Creation – a fundamental tenet of the Muslim faith - and by the whole and perfect circle of God's creation - *Kalil*, in Judaism. We are one human family, bound by mutual responsibility towards one another. When one bleeds, we all feel the pain; when one suffers privation, we are all deprived.

Yet despite all that binds us and all that should obliterate division, we have failed to stand together in affirmation of the sanctity of life. We have failed to unite to eliminate the poverty that afflicts so many millions of our fellow human beings, depriving them of any possibility to assert their right to human dignity.

There are indeed many causes of this failure, but we must be careful where we lay blame. Neither religion nor globalisation should be made scapegoats for the dire state of relations between sections of our world community. Globalisation as a process does not operate independently of either state or non state actors. It can be a positive force, improving education and eliminating hunger and despair. Similarly, religion should inspire our humanitarian agenda while religious texts should enrich this process, if only the reader will enrich the text by placing it in context. The true challenge facing us all is not a revival of genuine religious faith, but a frightening rejection of our religions' norms and ethics.

The burden of history is perhaps the greatest obstacle to a true understanding of the other. The pain and injustice which we have all suffered at different times in our shared history form the basis of traumatic cultural memories, and a seemingly insurmountable barrier to true fellowship and trust.

It is often the case that trauma resulting from violence or humiliation and an inherited sense of victimhood can leave individuals and communities incapable of self-criticism. In such circumstances it is difficult to find the trust necessary to begin a dialogue with the other.

This obstacle on the path to reconciliation must be tackled by sharing pain and acknowledging our mutual histories and experiences. As Rabbi Ronald Kronish, Director of the Inter-religions Coordinating Council in Israel (ICCI) once said (in the context of Arab-Israeli historiography):

“Reconciliation is to understand both sides... In the Arab-Israeli conflict, both sides have suffered greatly for a long time; but I am struck by how little either side has recognised ... or even tried to recognise the pain and suffering of the other. We tend to recite history so ideologically that we have very little consciousness about how the other side understands its own history in its own terms.”¹

In order to address inherited and personal trauma, we must establish dialogue centres where we can exchange our inherited experiences and express our anger within a civilized framework. These safe havens will help us to humanise relationships and to move *through* victimhood and *beyond* demonisation of the other.

Perhaps, the past cannot be changed but our understanding of it may evolve. An increased awareness of our neighbour’s experience of suffering, coupled with the humility to recognize the failings of our own communities, may open the way for understanding. This is the conclusion which we reached at the concluding session of the Kirchentag in Hannover (2005), to which we both contributed.

It is our hope that this book may mark a first step to creating centres of documentation and listening, of truth and reconciliation, to help the children of Abraham and others who have lived through confrontation to unburden themselves and begin a process of healing. Establishing trust through open dialogue is vital for a peaceful future.

According to Martha Nussbaum, compassion is: *“a painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person’s undeserved misfortune.”* Only by experiencing such compassion can we, the children of diverse faiths and cultures, recognise the sanctity of every human being.

Indeed, the Commandment: *“Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself”* is expanded in Jewish tradition to signify that one should never say: *“...because I have been degraded, my neighbour should be degraded with me, because I have*

¹ Kronish, Rabbi Ronald. Director of the ICCI (as above). Quote taken from an English-language article in the early 1990’s and used, in part, during a presentation Rabbi Kronish made at the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies, Amman, 1997.

been cursed, my neighbour should be cursed with me”, for that would be tantamount to degrading the image of God.

Similarly, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said: *“By Him in whose Hand is my life, none of you believes until he (or she) loves for their neighbour, what they love for themselves”*.²

It is our fervent hope that the expression of our pain and the retelling of our troubled histories in an atmosphere of humility and mutual respect, might release us from the pain of the past.

Winston Churchill said that there is no limit to the power that we can generate together. We would add that there is no limit to the good we can generate and pass on to future generations.

Let us work together to adopt and promote a mindset, in which the eradication of poverty, racism, exclusion and intolerance is a moral imperative for all. This process requires an interactive conversation and meaningful dialogue; it demands altruism rather than patronage, and participation rather than passivity.

Let us join together and herald a new age of sanity and wisdom where altruism informs action. Indeed, tolerance is no longer enough. As His Majesty the late King Hussein said: "Human beings are our most valuable possessions".

To emphasise our common humanity is not to deny the importance of transcendental concerns, rather it is simply to recognise that no single definition of the truth is universally accepted. Though we may come from very different cultural backgrounds, we have all contributed to a universal set of values and standards.

Our starting point, as we learn to live with multiple perceptions of the truth, must be a firm appreciation of our common humanity and of the power of human dignity.

² Sahih Muslim, Kitab al-Iman, Ch.18, #72