

Religion and World Order 1994 Symposium

Symposium Discussion

Patricia Mische

Let me open the discussion with first a question about, and second, an example of how religions can affect the direction of a new world order. First a question. What is the role of inner governance in global governance? Can the political-structures approach to governance suffice to bring a more humane world order? Or does a more humane world order also require inner moral and spiritual foundations, i.e., laws in the hearts and minds of people? Conversely, can inner governance suffice without the support or reinforcement of humane political structures, or a global polity? Should we attempt to bring the inner and outer forms of governance together? If so, how?

Second, let me share an example of the potential inter-action of world religions and global polities. The World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP) is involved in an interesting project that brings the realm of ethics and spiritual insight bear on to such real questions in the world today as the problem of humanitarian intervention. In collaboration with representatives of UN agencies WCRP is exploring when, and under what conditions should humanitarian intervention be undertaken. What should be the criteria, the ethics, the rules governing humanitarian intervention? Humanitarian intervention is a new area in global policy development. It encroaches on the principle of national sovereignty that has been enshrined in international law. Should states be allowed to intervene in the affairs of other states to safeguard human rights or deliver famine-relief? If so, when is it appropriate to do so? When is it inappropriate? Should the use of force be allowed? If so, when, under what conditions? This is an uncharted area in relationships between states.

This project brings together the realm of ethics and the realm of "realpolitik" as played out in the United Nations. It may affect future directions in the policies and operations of the UN. So when we talk about what should be the relationship of religion and global governance the question is not only a theoretical question; it takes us to the cutting edge of global politics and policy development.

David Cammack

I am an Episcopalian, interested in both religion and politics. I liked very much, Dr. Said, a couple phrases of yours, e.g., "re-investment of the sacred," and what you said about being in a world that is involved in a conflict of separate stories. You said that we need a new story. I think that there is a lot to that. I am particularly interested, from the little I know about the Baha'i faith, in what it says about understanding all the different stories. I would like to hear further from you, Dr. Huddleston and Dr. Said, on that.

John Huddleston

If I understand the question correctly, I believe that you are referring to the Baha'i concept of the unity of religions -- that all religions are essentially one, that they have the same universal values concerning our relationship with God, with fellow human beings, and with the Creation as a whole. In the fundamental things of life, religions are in unity. There are two aspects of religion which can cause apparent division. First, religious institutions often become corrupted over time and lose sight of the original teachings of their Founders. For example, apartheid was sanctioned by Christians. They sincerely believed this terrible philosophy was in accord with the Bible. Second, religions have appeared at different times in history and adapted general principles to the conditions of their time. Let me give an example of that. All religions advocate universal love for our fellow human beings. And yet prejudice has become a major issue in our own times as the world becomes a single society and people of different backgrounds intermix and stumble over one another. We have not been prepared for this and often fear or despise those who are different from ourselves. There is a need to consciously confront our prejudices and to develop a conscious appreciation of diversity. We can do this if we go back to the roots of our religion and find again our basic universals. The Baha'i teachings specifically mention conscious abolition of prejudice and appreciation of cultural diversity as essential to our spiritual well being.

Abdul Aziz Said

The perspective you heard me refer to comes from an attempt to hook together vision and faith. We see in the Middle East that an old order of conflict is collapsing before there is a vision of a new order to replace it. If we don't attend to that, we will continue to experience what is occurring in Eastern Europe -- in the former Yugoslavia and in the former Soviet Union. We ought to be looking at how to get a common vision out of a multiplicity of visions. How can we arrive at unity from the perspective of diversity? How can we do that? We don't have a model of that. In response to Pat Mische's question about achieving the external without the internal, from my perspective, we can't. From my perspective, internal disarmament has to occur simultaneously with external disarmament.

Paul Williams, Christian Children's Fund

I heard something that I find to be very troubling and I want to test it to see if I heard it correctly. That was the statement of Mr. Huddleston that the United States of America has a unique spiritual destiny that makes it uniquely equipped to provide leadership in the world today. This has a nice ring to it and we know that it comes out of the Puritan tradition, the Mayflower Compact, with its image of "a city set on a hill," a "light to the world," we have grown up with that. But, as Reinhold Niebuhr once pointed out, the events of history have sometimes refuted, rather cruelly, the pretention to virtue and innocence that has sometimes gone into that mythology. Like Don Quixote, going off to fight the battles of the Enlightenment, it is not that someone is doing something evil, but that a good person does not realize that there is a tragic flaw in his own self and that his castles are windmills, and his own armor is rusty, and his own horse is just a nag. He doesn't see it. So the ironic factor is that so many good people, with good intentions, good motives, who believe that they are uniquely equipped to lead because they have some spiritual preeminence, do some very sad things. So I prefer what the Rabbi said about the need for

repentance. The essence of genuine religion includes a self-critical element which drives this ultra-form of religion into something deeper -- into the spiritual dimension, into the dharma, into the stories and mythology that unite us. I find the idea that America has a certain pre-eminence because of its spiritual superiority to be very troubling. I may be pushing this too far.

Anonymous comment

The other troubling part of this is that the United States continues on the route of a huge consumption of resources and I didn't hear any of you talk about the need to think in terms of a sustainable consumption of resources and an equitable distribution of resources. This is another damaging part of the way the U.S. is going in the wrong direction rather than in the right direction. I would like a comment on this.

John Huddleston

Let me make a couple points of clarification. First, I am from the United Kingdom. Secondly, the Baha'i faith is not a U.S. religion. I should make it clear that what I am talking about is a spiritual inheritance in the real sense. This should not be confused with the material inheritance. I am not talking about power; I am not talking about the economy; I am not talking about spiritual arrogance; I am not talking about the Puritan tradition.

To give you a sense of what I am talking about, let me mention that in the Baha'i teachings about America there is an emphasis on spiritual leadership coming from those who have suffered, specifically Afro-Americans and Native Americans. Suffering gives them insights which those who have not suffered do not have. A part of America's inheritance is having people from all over the world with a diversity of experience. The suffering of some of these people can provide spiritual inspiration for this country so that it can fulfill its spiritual destiny. But it may choose to ignore them and pursue material gain. Then it will fail its destiny. There is a choice. The reason I said that was to provoke a reaction. We have a very negative view of ourselves and I don't believe that is a formula for creating a better society. We have a cynical view of ourselves and such a view eventually becomes a cop-out because it means that we don't really believe that anything better can be created. As a non-American I say that this great country has tremendous potential, as demonstrated in its history, to humbly give spiritual leadership in creating a much better global society.

Anand Mohan

I would like to say it is generally true that the Hindu does not view anything dichotomously. Hence, I feel that the two points of view just expressed are not in any necessary opposition to each other. It is indeed true that we hear, perhaps all too frequently, that America enjoys a certain spiritual pre-eminence because of its superior Christian morality. On the other hand, the mere fact that we are all gathered here at this podium from different religious traditions is itself testimony to the great spirit of tolerance and

accommodation and understanding that exists in American society, and which we can discern in few other societies in the world. I think we should be proud of ourselves for this and, at the same time, cultivate a becoming modesty and humility, and keep ourselves open to the influences of the other great religious traditions of the world, for the common good of all humankind.

Nadia Saad, World Bank, (retired)

I think that we lack the vocabulary, we lack the language, that would allow us to create a new vision of global relationship. In the enumeration of human rights, one of the most fundamental rights is religious freedom, a freedom to be left alone. The role of the state is to defend this right to be left alone. Then we believe in the pursuit of happiness. I will pursue my happiness. The belief is that my happiness contributes to the general good which is the sum of the happiness of individuals. We haven't stopped really to think in terms of our relationships. My right to self-determination is also compoundable to the right of self-determination of states. This idea of self-determination atomizes the society and atomizes us as individuals and atomizes states. There is no general framework of community or common good. We think in these individualistic terms. Our economics are based on that. If everyone would strive for his own happiness, we would all be happy. My second question is that I wonder whether my friend Abdul Aziz Said may be accusing the IMF of being fundamentalist? [Laughter]

Christopher Currie, World Federalist Association

One of the things that we keep running into, almost like a stone wall, is national sovereignty [inaudible]...even though [inaudible] the UN helped save the Kurds and everything. But national sovereignty is beginning to disintegrate as an effective ideology. [inaudible] I can see from reading the Old and New Testaments that there's a whole treasure trove of observations and commandments that can be used to trash the idea of...[inaudible] nationalism and national sovereignty. To the extent that the world's religions can help to make nationalism less holy and sacred that would greatly help the rest of us [inaudible]...hundreds and thousands of people dying of starvation every day. The problem is that we can't get over the ideological stone wall.

Jim O'Dea, Amnesty International

Amnesty International is, in a sense, a revelation of the sacred through a rather secular organization in the form of conscience, because Amnesty International has obviously studied acts of conscience around the globe. This wonderful mystery appears in the Amnesty process, so that whatever the other's ideology, or religion or tribal affiliation, I can see through those veils and say this is conscience, and likewise back. We have some kind of global transparency in the concept of conscience in that we recognize each other and we are at one with each other. My question is, do we all share conscience and, in conscience, that activator of a common value base that expresses itself in actions? Do we need to explore this more?

Corinne McLaughlin

I want to respond to the question of spiritual destiny by remembering that each nation... [inaudible]...I would challenge people from different countries to explore the founding of your country, and publicly herald the spiritual dimensions of it. I think that it would reveal something very powerful and inspiring. When America was doing something to which one would respond, that's hardly a spiritual country, it wasn't acting from its true spiritual ision or foundations. I would like this explored more.

Marc Gopin

[In response to Nadia Saad, above]

I would like to respond to what was said about spirituality in the relationship between the individual and community, suggesting that we come from an atomized world. You suggest that the ideal of individual rights is a very alienating process. This is a very important question and is the basis for a great deal of communitarian thinking. But we don't want to turn our back either, from a spiritual point of view, on the ideals of the individual as a sacred being as opposed to being just part of an entity that can and will be sacrificed to a sacred monarch, or whatever. That is one of the tragedies of many societies. I think of the difference between the medieval religious world or ancient cultures where individuals are seen only as part of a community and death by capital punishment is incidental, versus the later prophetic celebrations of the poorest of the poor and the image of God in that one human being. And I thank God that since the beginning of the modern era, liberalism has embraced the individual and argued for the individual rights of the laborer, etc. So, I think we need some kind of combination. Both concepts of the sacredness of the individual and the sacredness of the community have deep spiritual roots. It is wrong to overemphasize one against the other.

[In response to Paul Williams]

I also want to respond to the American issue. I want to emphasize the difference between the ideal and the real. I don't think that there is anything wrong with any religion or state celebrating its ideals and being proud of them, e.g. American ideals and it's constitution. The mistake comes in putting its realities under the carpet e.g., the destruction of Native American people over several centuries. That is the difference between the ideal and the real. You can celebrate the ideal of the Bills of Rights and use it as a working document, but you must also confess to the sinfulness of having not extended that to every human being. I feel the same way about Judaism and what it needs to both celebrate and confess. I think that it is very healthy to do both. We're not going to sell the ideals of a more humane world order to the average person without having a strong degree of positive pride. But we can also sell this with a strong dose of repentance.

John Huddleston

[In response to Nadia Saad]

I would like to respond to the question of individual rights and striving for happiness. We had to be deeply concerned in the past about rights because we had to deal with oppressive governments. Freeing ourselves from oppressive government has been essential so that we can become full and mature human beings. That is the history of the human rights movement. But beyond that we should stop to think -- what is our purpose in life? I would suggest that the purpose that you would find in all great world religions is not simply to "be happy," but to become noble beings, to move toward God. And if we talk about civilization as being dedicated to helping all persons -- every man, woman and child on the planet -- to achieve their full potential, then things start to fall into place.

The second point I want to take up is the unhealthy overemphasis in our own time on the nation state. The religious community can play a very powerful role in changing this. We should start talking about being world citizens. Religions in all the countries of the world have great influence in the education process. I do not see why it would not be possible for Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and Baha'is to work together to introduce into every national education system this concept of what it is to be a world citizen. Religious communities are much more powerfully placed to do this than the secular intellectuals and the academics who can come up with wonderful ideas but cannot persuade people to implement them. Religion, because it is so close to the heart of the vast majority of people is in a position to do what academics cannot do. I suggest that one of the things that we should be doing as a united religious community is helping our own countries to introduce this concept of being a world citizen and all that this implies. If taken seriously, this proposal could be a major element in establishing a just and peaceful global society. This is in effect a response to the fourth guideline question we were given -- e.g., developing a multi-religious movement for a humane world order.

David Little

[In response to Jim O'Dea]

I just want to pick up on the point about conscience made by the gentleman from Amnesty International and connect it with some of the other points that have been made. I also want to put in a good word for Hugo Grotius. Grotius is a complicated figure and he said many different things in regard to the freedom of religion. Some of them were liberal and some of them not, but on the international side, it seems to me fair to say that the great objective of Hugo Grotius secularizing natural law was precisely to create a space for the exercise of conscience that was not dominated by any particular state, community, or, for that matter, religious community, in any forceful or coercive way. In other words, Grotius was part of a movement in the 17th and 18th centuries that was deeply committed to the idea that conscience really is sovereign and to have a sovereign conscience means that there is, at least on this earth, no higher authority -- not the state, not other groups. The implication of that view, very precisely, was that everyone should be free within some limits to exercise that conscience without forcible intrusion from earthly authorities.

Now that principle, it seems to me, very much underlies the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 18 includes not only religious liberty but also freedom of

conscience. That principle, it seems to me, is at the root of the idea of non-discrimination that I was talking about. In brief, one may not be disadvantaged or mistreated or persecuted in the civil order because of one's conscientious beliefs. The implication of that idea is, in a certain way, to secularize the civil order but I am not sure that is altogether so bad.

I must say that I feel a bit concerned by loose talk about re-sacralizing the civil order. I don't mean to say that religion should not play a role in civil and political life, but we must remember our history. We have tried sacralization of the civil order in a number of ways in our own Western tradition and elsewhere, and that in reaction we have generated precisely the emphasis upon sovereignty of conscience and all the privileges that go with that. Sovereignty of conscience can be abused. I am not suggesting it can't be. My view is that making human rights work requires a delicate balance, as others have suggested, between trying to make sufficient room for individual liberty, and at the same time attending to communal interests. But both sides in this discussion need to be represented and remembered and the great virtues of protecting freedom of conscience seem to me to be an important part of that.

Anand Mohan

I am fully in agreement with the comment that Mr. David Little has made. I should not like to appear that I minimize the importance of conscience or of tolerance for dissent, although those of us raised in the eastern religious traditions take this for granted. Certainly, the attitude of Grotius was most commendable. While Suarez and other Catholic writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries considered Protestants to be heretics who were to be fought with the utmost bitterness, and the protestants reciprocated in kind, Grotius, writing in the midst of the most savage of religious wars, refrained from all expressions of hostility, not merely as a political posture, but out of a genuine religious conviction.

His tolerance went even further. While recognizing a special bond among Christian powers, Grotius was the first writer to suggest the abandonment of discrimination against Saracens and other infidels. My comments on Grotius in my initial presentation were confined to what I think were the unfortunate consequences which flowed from his attempt to secularize and modernize the conception of natural law and divorce it altogether from its religious moorings. Grotius might not have intended those unfortunate consequences; but they are not any the less unfortunate for that reason. The development of international law as purely customary and conventional law, entirely positivistic in its thrust, and not binding on its subjects except with their own consent, and only when it served their perceived individual interests, is certainly not a desirable development.

I am very indebted to Rabbi Gopin for suggesting at the very outset that, in the process of sitting in hasty judgement on the horrible things that secular institutions have done, we ought to remind ourselves of the dual character of our own religious traditions -- that in the long history of human civilization, some of those who have spoken and acted in the name of God and of God's law, have also been the agents of a great deal of oppression and cruelty, the provokers of many wars and hostilities, and the abettors of animosities.

The only cure for this terrible malady lies in what Dr. Said characterized as internal discipline. The sure way in which we can become authentically religious and genuinely spiritual is by becoming as self-

critical as possible and desirable. It is very easy to criticize someone else's religious tradition, and very difficult to criticize one's own. But unless the strongest and sternest critics of the ailments of a particular religious tradition are to be found amongst the adherents of that very tradition, our attempts to promote inner-religious dialogue, and peace, understanding, and harmony between religious groups and communities will forever elude us.

Lastly, I should like to say that the whole rhetoric of rights is alien, not only to the Hebraic tradition, as Rabbi Gopin pointed out, but to all the religious traditions of the world -- East and West. Indeed, I would go so far as to venture that even in the secular tradition of the West, one heard constant references to the prevalence of natural law, but not of natural rights -- at least not until their Lockean formulation in the seventeenth century.

I am reminded, in this context, that when the eminent historian, H.G. Wells, suggested in the middle of World War II that the world sorely needed a Declaration of the Rights of Man, Mahatma Ghandhi countered by asserting what the world really needed was a Declaration of the Duties of Man. I am personally inclined to agree with Ghandhi. Rights and duties are two faces of the same coin. We have erred egregiously by espousing rights and eschewing obligations.

Abdul Aziz Said

I offer a short story about a person who went East and ordered a shirt to be tailored. This was in Egypt. After they agreed upon everything, the person asked, "When will my shirt be ready?" The tailor said, "In a week, In Shallah." In Shallah means "God willing." The person came a week later and said, "Where's my shirt?" The tailor said, "It is not ready yet." And the person said, "Please tell me when my shirt will be ready and take Allah out of it." The tailor said, "That I cannot tell you." Many years later the Egyptian came to New York and he saw a group of Americans with wooden paddles in hand, making waves in the ocean. He asked, "What are you doing?" They said, "We are making yogurt." He said, "How can you make yogurt out of ocean water without yogurt cultures?" They said, "If you try hard enough you can make anything out of anything." In much of the East human responsibility has gone to lunch; divine will is present. In much of the West, divine will has gone to lunch; human responsibility is present. When human responsibility has gone to lunch, human energy becomes dissipated; when divine energy has gone to lunch, human energy becomes misdirected. This is scientific materialism. So what we ought to do in the civil order is make room on the table for both human responsibility and divine will. They eat at the same table because this is how we are going to discover that the divine and the personal are connected. This is how we are going to discover in our own lives that investment of the sacred means the humanization of the sacred and the consecration of the human.

This not alien to any religion. Going back to David Little, this is where I talk about political fundamentalism. You and me, we have to get together and acknowledge that while its true that in the 16th and the 18th centuries accepted the teaching of a church, an organized religion, that said the earth is flat, today we have become just as myopic as they were myopic. We have the doctrines of "scientific politics." That too is fundamentalist; it is another pathology.

Serif Mardin

My remarks here are a summary of what I said before. It is impossible to understand Islam without trying to understand Muslims -- without understanding the specific role that they have forged for the implementation of the values of Islam. Islam is not an empty vessel. There are certain ways in which Muslims think about the implementation of their values which are part of their historical memory. The best informed public opinion in the United States and in the world has not really given attention to the way in which the Islamic historical memory is structured. That structuring is the way Muslims carry out their values. That is the point we have to underline if we want to talk about Islam.

Patricia Mische

Professor Mardin held up something important to think about. We are at a conference on global structures that assumes the relevant structures are political. But he was speaking about structures of mind. Structures of mind undergird and inform political structures, whether at local, national or global levels. Structures of mind include the historical experiences, beliefs, and traditions of people. They are multi-faceted and complex. So when we think about global structures we need to keep in mind that they include not only political arrangements. There are also structures of mind, heart, spirit. How do we really bring these structures together to inform each other?

In closing, it is important to note that this has been only a beginning dialogue. But we have seen that religion is both an actor in global affairs and an object. It affects global policies and is affected by them. Religion is not apart from history. It acts in history and is acted upon. How can we bring the positive strengths of the world's religious traditions, memories, faith, and spirituality to bear on the kind of world order we want to help bring into being in the next century? Religious groups have institutions of learning, social structures, social systems that are important networks of local, national and global activity. They can have tremendous effects on structures. For better or for worse, they will affect the shape of the future. They will do this through both structures of mind and global political structures. Religion should thus be included in the dialogue and discussion now going on about world order and global governance going into the next century.