

Media, Religion and a Culture of Peace

Kristiansand 19 May 2007

By Kjell Magne Bondevik, former Prime Minister of Norway and President of The Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights

I am sure that contributing to peace is a priority for all of us. Working in media it is important always to have focus on how your work may affect tensions, conflicts and strive for peace.

In the contemporary environment, dubbed as information age, media has a central role to play. The comparison of religion with media studies is a fairly new phenomenon which has increasingly become of immense significance. One intention of this issue is to argue that transnational media and cultural studies must develop sophisticated understanding of religion, a topic it has by and large ignored. The issue is still very polarised as those with secular leaning might want to detach religion from mainstream public affairs considering it as personal matter. On the other hand some believe that religion transcends over a wide array of aspects and that it is as much part of the modern life where one witnesses a proliferation of religious movements in and through modernity itself.

Religious communities are not merely organized by concrete texts and stable sets of traditions and practices. Rather, in their modern (or postmodern) manifestations, the world religions continue to be tightly woven into the fabric of daily life for billions of individuals. This happens in ways that have radically transformed various aspects such as the advent of nationalism, mass-culture and mass-politics, and most recently the electronic mass-media. For many of the world's geographically dispersed peoples, as well as for those living in particularly media-intense environments, communities of religious belief are now often sustained via mass-media channels: television, radio, CDs, film, and the Internet.

These developments have been obscured by the media that tends to follow certain patterns that helps produce and sustain a culture of intolerance and spreading of war. Many media watch-dogs and scholars like Johan Galtung have proposed that media so far has been playing a negative role by promoting and endorsing values of war like disposition, thereby engendering a culture of violence. Media has got an immense potential but if it is being manipulated for wrong purpose, the affects can create destruction. The debate now centres on the question of harnessing its power for the better and to foster strong values of tolerance and peace.

It is a general held belief that media should remain secular or non partisan in its leaning just as a state is supposed to be. However there is a growing unease regarding this as has been pointed out by the studies conducted that media's role is quite polarised.

Extremism is linked with religion and that is made to be a dangerous combination. Many explicitly argue that "secularism" needs to be critiqued and rethought. Something of Edward Said's concept of "secular criticism" continues to be vital to the project. Said maintains that the secularity of our secular criticism need not articulate itself in opposition to religion, exiled from religious discourse or religious identity; rather, secular criticism can denote a critical commitment to misuse of religion for the advancement of extremist agenda.

It is in the best interests of a secular criticism of religion that we consider the manipulation of religion to buttress nationalist and territorializing aspirations. For religion, may indeed be used as a tool of imperialisms big (British and Spanish imperialisms especially) and small (ethnic cleansing in the Balkans and elsewhere). Moreover, religious difference has continued to be a means of justifying myriad forms of persecution, intimidation, and violence in the postcolonial world, whether it is the cruelty of Israel's treatment of Palestinian Muslims and Christians, the ruthless terror network of Al-Qaeda, or the senseless acts of terrorist violence committed by zealots of all religious stripes. When religious symbolism does mask the ambitions of ideology in these ways, it can be a harmful reinvention of the old European concept of "divine right"-divine violence.

Hence to curb these opinions from rising again as a menace, media organizations have to realise that their contribution in establishment of the culture of peace, so direly needed in the world, is very crucial. In true spirit of all religions by God, peace does not only mean absence of war but it is the empowering of humans so as to take maximum advantage of the ability they have been given for the better. One would assume that with all the technical advancement mankind has unlimited potential for progress not just physically but spiritually. Unfortunately that is not the case, unless we render ourselves true to the purpose of our creation that is to spread love and peace among ourselves, the physical development holds no meaning.

With the help of communication technology the message of peace can be brought to all four corners of the earth, without any restrictions of time and space. Its rather unfortunate that media has not been as forthcoming as it should in this regard. However the time is now to use media as means of productive change rather than violence.

Christian values

When I engaged in politics many years ago, my motivation came from my Christian values. I learned early that both my religious belief and politics, and governance and church are two different things, and should not be mixed up. Christianity is first and foremost a question of my relationship with God, of the belief in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour. Politics are on the other hand a way of organising the society to the best for the individual and the community. But still there must be a connection between the two. As a Christian I can not leave my Christian faith and conviction at home when I go to my job. I bring with me some values and principles which also have meaning in political life.

For me these main values are:

- Man is created by God, in God's image, and has an inviolable value.
- The principle of stewardship. God gave us responsibility for taking care of his creation
- The double commandment of love: To love God above all and to love my fellow human being as myself.

Common values

Unfortunately, many people around the world carry with them the burden of fear of people different from themselves, and especially if they have another belief. Why? I think that religious and political authorities often have used their position of authority to point to differences more than to similarities. Fear and division are unfortunately widely used tools of power to keep the disciples obedient and loyal. All too often religion is distorted and abused to stir up mistrust and hate, which in turn provide a breeding-ground for conflict and war. A strong religious dimension is often an integral part of unrest and violent power struggles. We have seen this in Northern Ireland, in the Middle East, in the Balkans, in the Sudan and elsewhere in Africa. Few, if any, religions actually have this aggressive characteristic in their scriptures. It is man-made. Religion is always interpreted by someone. But we can act against such negative interpretations by enhancing our efforts to promote understanding between people. We have several common values in all main religions, such as respect for the sacred, human dignity, and the ideas of peace and justice. The knowledge of this helps break down the religious and cultural barriers that have been erected between peoples, societies and individuals. At the Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights this is a part of our platform; to promote peace and reconciliation, with strong emphasis on interfaith dialogue.

I also want to challenge you to consider if and how you can use the media for the same purpose. News-programs in the media are often conflict-oriented. But other programs, which I know you

are working on, open up more room for going deeper for example by facilitating dialogues in television programs.

In this regard I also want to point out that all major world religions teach the virtue of peace. Not just peace in the sense of absence of war, but peace between people. The Hebrew word for peace, shalom, and the Arabic word, salaam, have the same root. Both have a broader meaning, referring to a state of mind, to relations with other people and relations with God. This is the same as in the Christian blessing: "peace be with you."

The writings of all the world religions call on us to make peace. In the Christian faith we have Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God." The holy book of Islam, the Koran, says, " If they incline to peace, make peace with them". Mahatma Ghandi, a Hindu, put it like this: "Every human being can be made to change his or her violent behaviour into a peaceful one, by virtue of human nature itself which possesses an inherent partiality for peace." Other religions have similar messages.

Responsibility of leaders

I want to emphasize the importance of mobilizing the religious communities. Religious leaders have the means and resources to reach the believers and to reach out, down to the most remote groups. The best example of how efficient the communication among religious communities can be, you find in the fight against HIV/Aids.

The world situation compels us to work hard to reduce tension between religious groups. It can start from the top down and from the grassroots up - both ways, at the same time. The dialogue must be based on reciprocity, confidence and cooperation.

Also political leaders and media have a responsibility to oppose any attempt to exploit social, economic and other injustices in order to stir up religious hatred and suspicion.

I also want to emphasize that knowledge makes dialogue easier.

When we feel confident about our own religious belief, it is easier to meet and talk to people from another faith.

People of different faiths are sometimes afraid of losing their religious identity or even their own faith in interfaith dialogue, but my experience and that of others have been the opposite.

In my view promoting sound values is especially important in schools. Our schools must foster tolerance and understanding. They must be a means of combating hatred and fear of those who are different. In all schools, also in religious schools, pupils must learn compassion and consideration for others. And I will quote Pope Benedict: "Never before have we needed this education as much as now, particularly if we look toward the new generations. So many young people in areas marked by conflict are taught sentiments of hate and vendetta in ideological context where seeds of ancient rancours are cultivated and psyches are prepared for future violence. "

In 1997 Norway changed the religious education in our schools from a mainly Christian focus; to a new and compulsory subject "Christianity, Religions and Life Stance" (the Norwegian acronym is KRL, for "Kristendom, religion og livssynskunnskap"). All Norwegian students now receive a substantial amount of knowledge not only of Christianity but also of Islam and the other world religions, as well as of philosophy and more secular outlooks on life. Apart from ensuring that all students will have a good knowledge of the Christian tradition as well as of other religions and worldviews/life stance, the intention has been to open a space for practicing dialogue in an increasingly multireligious society. The different religious communities have participated in developing this new curriculum.

Our challenge is to teach about all religions in a fair and correct way, filled with respect. We must also get correct information about our different worlds, and get away from stereotypes about each other. You find moderate and extreme Christians and Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs.

It is a challenge for media to give a balanced picture and not contribute to building images of enemies and stereotypes between people of different faiths.

Dialogue and diapraxis on the local level

The effect of our dialogue should manifest itself first and foremost in local communities, where conflicts often arise. We can sit here in this meeting, in relative good comfort, meet in civilized settings and have an intellectual sharing of opinions and experiences. But it is in our every day life that the result of our sharing of values will materialize itself. There is a lot of mistrust in many communities. And many people do not feel safe in their local environment because of discrimination. To be a minority in a society can be hard, if the society does not find ways to live with and respect differences. Here also the media can play a constructive role.

A Danish theologian and the director of the Islamic-Christian study center in Copenhagen, Lise Rasmussen, introduced the term diapraxis 15 years ago. The main idea is to work together on an equal basis. She defines it like this - Diapraxis is not the application of dialogue, but dialogue in action. It is a process that calls for a contextual approach to dialogue, enabling people to meet in order to try to reveal and transform the reality they share. Religious leaders have a responsibility to give their followers and members of their community room and encouragement to engage in diapraxis.

Religious dialogue must take place on the grassroots, solving practical questions concerning the every day life of the people. Common projects like solving the problems of water supply, lack of security in the neighborhood, conflicts between youths or the need for extra homework assistance for young people or immigrants. Having concrete common problems to solve can help people to develop friendship and fellowship.

Maybe you as media-people can cover more of what is going on in this regard?

Challenges in interfaith dialogue

Still, we must remember that many religious groups are not interested in dialogue, both among Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and others. It is safe to stay within our own community, and there may be an inclination among religious and political leaders to hold on to their positions of power. Or to quote the president of Cairo's al-Azhar university ,Ahmad al- Tayyeb: " When the guides of humanity and the builders of human history turn their backs on religions and on their sublime philosophies, they become like a group of blind people who are incapable of guiding themselves, let alone others."

Religion may also be used for political and economic purposes. And different interpretations of a religion can also hamper a necessary development in different areas, and conserve attitudes that need to be changed in order to promote a free and just world with equal rights for all:

- Old traditions can stand in the way of necessary development
- Inequality between the sexes can be a challenge, and is often maintained by laws emanating from a doubtful interpretation of the scriptures of a religion
- Certain religious groups are only motivated by the hope of gaining converts, and serve only their own followers

- Cultural and religious history are often closely connected, both in negative and positive ways. An example is the tradition of circumcising girls. A barbaric tradition that has no place in today's world and must be abandoned.

Challenges in Christian/Muslim relations

We have over the last few years seen a polarization especially between Christians and Muslims. Principal of Indonesia's Christian Batak Church, Rev Dr Jamilin Sirait, when explaining the Indonesian situation, had a disturbing tale to tell of being a Christian minority: "One of our problems is that we (the Christians) are seen as Westerners. Christianity is linked to Western thinking. Many of our Muslim brothers and sisters see us as enemies, and opponents of Muslim thought, while many Christians see Muslims as extremists". He said in a meeting in Denmark that one of the major challenges of the Christian-Muslim dialogue is to eliminate these incorrect views of each other whereby Christians are perceived as representing the West, and Muslims are seen as extremists.

The Muslim writer Tariq Chaudhry says: "Muslims share a common view of a constant onslaught against them and their religion. Their inability to militarily or politically resist external threats and aggression adds to their feeling of humiliation, which Muslims have been feeling since the time of the crusades and colonial occupation, when large parts of the Muslim world were under foreign domination." He also underlines that after independence one Muslim nation after another have experienced defeat at the hands of non-Muslims, whether it be in the Middle East, South Asia or in the Balkans.

This perspective has also been made a point in the final report of the Alliance of Civilization-High Level Group presented in 2006: Muslim communities share a sense of "discrimination, humiliation, or marginalization against them based on ethnic, religious, or other identity markers."

The philosopher Elie Wiesel points to important root causes to conflict, war and terror in the world. They are based on experiences of humiliation, he says. He shows that occupation creates a feeling of humiliation, and the same happens when a culture becomes undervalued. You also find it among people and in countries that are economically oppressed, and where the redistribution of wealth is very unjust. It is important to fight conditions that make people, individuals and ethnic groups feeling humiliated. It must be a priority to develop strong attitudes and communication systems between and within countries, which in words and actions show respect for different groups and treat people equally, both majorities and minorities. This is also a theme of the important UN-project, Alliance of Civilization., which I support.

There have been many conflicts between Muslims and Christians throughout history, but it is important to remember that there is also a history of cooperation between religions. As far back as the Middle-Ages, goods and merchandise, but not least, ideas and knowledge crossed the divide between the Christian West and the Islamic Orient. Up till today, there are examples such as South Africa and the overthrow of Apartheid, and Muslim and Christian religious leaders working together to build peace in war-ravaged Sierra Leone. We also see in the history of Egypt, that Christians and Muslims worked closely together and built a strong alliance to fight the British colonialists. History also shows that the communities in our part of the world that were most willing to learn from others have developed most rapidly. This, I believe, is indeed an important lesson.

It would be useful to get more insight in the attitudes and organisation of the cultures and countries that have very low internal tension between different cultures, religions or ethnic groups, and try to draw some experience from it that can be used in other countries and contexts. I challenge you to use your media to cover such examples.

Learn from good praxis

It is important to develop a line of thought between civilizations, that allows cultures to live side by side, albeit with very different characteristics, where dialogues between different groups are based on respect, and where there is an environment for dialogue about differences and about how to practice different human rights perspectives.

Living with differences in religion, ethnicity and identity must be learned, and structures for it must be built. Through greater knowledge about each other and a broad dialogue in all parts of society, we can make wonders. More knowledge reduces fear, and friendship breaks down barriers. In this regard I want to share with you some experiences from my country, Norway. The Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities in Norway was established 30 May 1996 and include 12 member communities today.

The goals of the Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities are defined in the statutes:

- To promote mutual understanding and respect between different religious and life stance communities through dialogue,
- To work towards equality between various religious and life stance communities in Norway based on the United Nations covenants on Human Rights and on the European Convention on Human Rights,

- To work, internally and externally, with social and ethical issues from the perspective of religions and life stances.

This council has played a very important role in Norway as a bridge builder between religious- and life stance communities.

Close dialogue between different religious and faith communities during many years, often connected to current political topics and conflicts, contributed strongly to the non-violent reaction in Norway to the conflict surrounding the Muhammed-caricatures. Knowledge of what is considered sacred for the different religions, as well as of the common understanding of what freedom of speech means in practice, created a good base for dialogue in this critical situation.

It could be a matter of a special discussion to talk about the role media played in this case, and ask if it contributed to conflict or peace.

My conclusion is this: I truly believe that religion can be a part of the solution, not part of the problem. It is our common endeavour that can make this come true throughout the world. Therefore we need to strengthen and encourage inter-religious dialogues, involving both religious and political leaders. I hereby challenge us all to do it together. Also you who are working in the media!

A free and independent press is an important part of democracy. The world has much to thank journalists for. They have breathed life into the public sphere, in which authority must account for itself, if it is to be seen as legitimate.

Journalists can also play a role for promoting peace and reconciliation. In a book called "Peace Journalism" by Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick they point out three criteria for peace journalism - in which I fully agree:

Peace journalism

- uses the insight of conflict analysis and transformation to update the concepts of balance, fairness and accuracy in reporting
- provides a new route map tracing the connections between journalists, their resources, the stories they cover and the consequences of their journalism - the ethics of journalistic intervention

- builds an awareness of non-violence and creativity into the practical job of everyday editing and reporting.

Let me also add the importance of highlighting peace initiatives in media, and focusing on good examples of resolution and reconciliation efforts.

I think these are good guidelines for journalists who want to contribute to peace.