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Religion: Dividing or uniting element in European societies and communities?

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Let me begin with a perhaps surprising preliminary remark: According to calculations from 2010, 83.6% of the world's population belonged to a religion. Conversely, only 16.4% considered themselves to be non-religious or non-denominational. According to estimates for the year 2050, the proportion of religiously affiliated people in the world will even increase – to a total of 86.8%.

The impression that sometimes arises in Western Europe that religion as a whole is on the retreat and that a general secularization is spreading worldwide is therefore deceptive. It is essential to observe the influence of religions on the way people live together. Religion is not, as we might deduce from our Western European history, a private matter, but on the contrary: it is an eminently public matter! To deny this would be downright fatal.

Even if nine out of ten people on this earth will soon belong to a religion, this does not mean that peaceful coexistence is guaranteed. Rather, the opposite seems to be the case: there have been and still are plenty of wars, armed conflicts and discrimination in which religion, or at least the invocation of a particular religion, plays a key role. This also applies to the current wars in Ukraine and in Israel/Palestine.

A first answer must therefore honestly be: Obviously religions do not create peace in principle! And this despite the fact that all religions talk about peace, harmony and love. This is exactly what religions are accused of: They would primarily cause conflict and discord in order to claim at the same time that they want to contribute to peace.

It is true: Like everything human, religion can also be misused.

Throughout history, social, societal and political conflicts have been veiled or exaggerated by reference to religion. This made it easier to recruit devoted comrades-in-arms and obedient fellow fighters. The prospect of heavenly reward did not deter even the greatest sacrifice. Religion was and is used to inspire and disinhibit people. This must first be admitted openly and self-critically.

Nevertheless, I am convinced that religions – i.e. in the plural – are considerably challenged, but also capable of enabling different beliefs to coexist peacefully. The representatives of the various world religions are well aware of how often inhumane things happen or have happened in the name of a religion. Interfaith conferences are constantly being held to explore how peace can be achieved between people of different religions and worldviews. That is also the purpose of our conference here in Berlin.

The only question is to what extent this desire for peace and these declarations of peace will have an impact in the conflict areas of our world – and to what extent representatives of the different religions are prepared to distance themselves from the prevailing policies of their own state under certain circumstances. With regard to Russia, for example, I have a question mark over this. There is still far too often an unholy alliance between political power and religion – and the willingness to allow oneself to be used or abused as a religion for the sake of certain advantages.

But there is not only potential in all religions to hinder peace, but also to promote it. We must bring them to bear. In what way? It is an arduous but hopeful path.

(1) It begins seemingly very simply: the encounter from person to person is a prerequisite for all humanity. People of different religious convictions must first simply get to know each other so that we can break down the mutual prejudices that still exist due to ignorance and inertia. Curious encounters must precede the actual understanding of the potential to create peace: "Do you know who I am?" is for instance the name of a "Project of the three major religions for peaceful coexistence in Germany".

(2) Existential concern, i.e. personal religiosity, does not exclude openness towards one another: We must recognize that our religious convictions differ in their essence and aspirations, that they are definitely in competition with each other and that no goal justifies denying these differences. Every encounter, every dialog requires a considerable willingness to be open to the unfamiliar and foreign. It is a matter of respecting the religion of others, even if one does not accept its content for oneself. This is why religious people - despite their different religious backgrounds - should not be divided into "believers" and "non-believers"! For we religious people are all united by the fact that we do not understand ourselves in terms of ourselves, but live from a relationship that goes beyond us (no matter what we call it in concrete terms), which determines our origins and our future. The common prerequisite can enable us to assume and promote responsibility for peaceful coexistence together.

(3) All of this can only happen with mutual respect and tolerance. On the one hand, both are the prerequisite for our encounters and discussions – at least to some extent. But on the other hand, they are also the goal. Even if one's own convictions are absolute for oneself, they cannot be asserted absolutely. If this is accepted by all sides, a high degree of tolerance has already been achieved.

(4) In my opinion, it is about working out the intersection of what we all have in common in order to promote civil interaction with one another. Discovering and living these commonalities is an enormous but rewarding undertaking. However, once we have established trust in each other and created "channels" of relationship, local or even global conflicts can be contained or resolved much more easily.

Are there *public* places where this can be practised in order to avoid isolationist and defensive tendencies that can lead to violent conflicts? In other words: places where common convictions and binding principles for our society can be sought while respecting religious diversity?

For me, in relation to the situation in Germany, this could be religious education in the public school system. There are now numerous experiences from schools and school types where pupils of different religions are taught together, at least some of the time, and learn to better understand the religions of others, but also their own. This enables them to form their own opinions.

Of course, even then the fundamental question remains: what effect does interfaith dialogue have beyond those directly involved in it? Does it have effective political consequences? My conviction is that interfaith efforts must be supported and promoted more strongly by European politics. It is not at all a question of creating advantages for any religious communities. It is exclusively about doing justice to the importance of religions as a "public matter". Policies that neglect this aspect quickly lead to dead ends, both nationally and internationally.

Even if politicians explicitly describe themselves as secular, they would do well to acknowledge the importance of religions and the opportunities that lie in promoting interfaith encounters and understanding.

In view of globalization and the fact that people from different cultures encounter each other much more frequently than in the past, I believe that it is absolutely necessary for political actors to become "religiously literate" (in the international debate, this is referred to as "religious literacy") – in other words: the ability to understand and integrate religions and to use its positive binding forces (for example, under the guiding principle of "doing mercy") for the social cohesion of our plural societies.

Are religions a unifying element? My answer is: Yes, I am not giving up hope! Peace in the different regions of the world cannot be achieved against religions, but only with them. The religions must consciously face up to this task, but also allow themselves to be bound by it! And one thing should be clear to all of us: Anyone who misuses religion to legitimize hatred, violence and war is committing blasphemy and is thus placing themselves outside their own religious traditions!

We need to be much more careful here so that religions are what they should be: Paths to peace with oneself, to peace in our societies – and, in the tradition of the Abrahamic religions, to peace with God.

May our conference be influenced by this spirit!