

HUMAN RIGHTS AND RELIGION

By: Norman Noorallah Gabay

Once, when filling out an INS application form for legal permanent residency, Albert Einstein came across a question asking him about his race. He answered - "Of Human Race".

It was in the news that a conference was being held by United Nations about "Peaceful Coexistence Among the Followers of the Monolithic Religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the hope of establishing an increasing level of friendship and good will among the participants.

It is always delightful for a follower of these religions to hear such news, and I was especially pleased to see that the attention of sages of the world is finally drawn to the plain fact that it is not rational for religions to have antagonistic attitudes toward each other, as some of them do. Rather, they should support and complement one another in an effort to maintain peace and security for their followers.

Schiller once said, "Accumulating ever-increasing power is not a wise way to gain fame and power. Greatness comes when we utilize power in logical, proper and rational ways."

People are not born with prejudice and hatred. Religious discrimination being the worst, I cannot express the humiliation I constantly suffered as a result of religious persecution and prejudice during my childhood in the city of Kashan (in Iran 1940's).

Often, I am forced to remember the prejudice infested environment of Kashan, where I was raised and grew up. Agonizing memories of our neighborhood baker who persistently refused to put a loaf of bread I intended to buy in my hands, as it was customary to do. He considered me, a 10 year old boy, as untouchable (najess), and thought that touching my hands or contacting my flesh would make him unclean. The origin and cause of this dreadful misconception was his religious discourse, usually read or told to him by someone, more often than not, his mullah. He had been taught that the Christians, Zoroastrians and Jewish people and any non-Muslim are filthy and "najess" because they drink wine containing alcohol, which causes intoxication.

A Jew, a Christian or a Zoroastrian (oldest Iranian Religion), whether he or she drinks wine or not, is untouchable. The poor baker was not aware that a 10 year old boy knows nothing about wine and ignorantly kept his distance from this untouchable boy.

Despite my young age, I felt humiliated, and vigorously resented and hated many kind of discrimination, mistreatment or insult I recall my father always saying: "the remedy for these wrong doings is the advancement of knowledge, and in the future, the well educated man would never tolerate such capricious attitudes.

Once I was talking with a close and highly educated friend who is a medical doctor. He loves wine and indeed drinks it much more than any Jew. During one discussion, I noticed a hint of anti-semitism in his remarks. I told him:

"I notice that your attitude towards Jews and other non-Muslim are not much different from that of your father or your ancestors. I understand the difference between the cleansing properties of alcohol and its intoxicating effects. My objection is to the philosophical aspects of this nonsense. Do you cleanse 'dirt' with 'dirt?' Why you! you with your higher education?"

"It is an inherited trait," he said.

I remember my father saying education will eradicate this kind of thinking. But, in this day and age, even my highly educated friend and personal doctor is no different from the old neighborhood baker in Kashan. Why?

In spite of the fact that he has been exposed to Christian values during his education abroad, he is still under the influence of his past religious doctrine, and there are many more like him throughout the world.

Discrimination and religious hatred exists in various forms. In public and private gatherings, practiced by literate and illiterate people. Our good doctor is one of them.

Why?

Let us not blame only my fellow Iranians. Religious discrimination is practiced by people of all lands. In Europe, Africa, America and other countries, there is prejudice and hate against Muslims, Christians, and Jews and all others.

Why?

Is it not astonishing to see Europeans, Greeks, Sunni Muslims, Shiite Muslims, Protestants, Catholics, Black African, some of whom have pledged to serving the children of Jesus, all living and acting in the black tunnel of religious hatred and discrimination?

Why?

Pope Pius XII, who was the leader of Christianity during World War n, could have saved millions of lives, and prevented all the killing and destruction, but he did not.

Why?

The Orthodox Christian Serb priest could have saved the lives of thousands of Muslim men, women and children, in Bosnia, sooner and better than the armies of the UN or the U.S. He refused to do so.

Why?

Even religious leaders provoked and promoted blood-letting and killings. For centuries during their fame and power, many religious leaders of the three monolithic religions could have saved millions of lives, just as Mahatma Gandhi did in aborting the murder of millions of Muslims by the prejudiced Hindu of India. But they did not (The Hindu religious leader once said, "all doors of heaven are opened to a Hindu who kills a Moslem whose shadow has fallen on him").

Why!

The answers as well as the root of the question will remain alive among the Jews, Muslims and Christians until the end of time.

Since discrimination and hatred are based in part in negative writings of the great religions, and since the stability and continuity of these writings is tied to the stability and continuity of these religions, discriminations will always be with us in some form or another.

All prophets have tried to predict the future to satisfy a basic need of human beings to be prosperous and happy. But, history is also a prophet which predicts the future based on the past. If we remain unaware of the past, we cannot build the future. Look at the lengthy Crusades of the Ottomans, including the massacre of one million and five hundred thousand Armenians.

Considering the fact that almost all the cruelties inflicted on all people over the past centuries have been in the name of religion, the neutralization of hateful religious writings and edicts is THE ONLY WAY to preserve the human rights of their followers. Such an act will also avoid further cruelty in the name of religion, eliminate the use of religious

edicts to create chaos and riots, and prevent a few religious leaders from enriching themselves and Irving a life of luxury by exploiting the religious fervor of their own flock.

It helps when, sometimes, a wise, moral and intelligent clerical leader is in the seat of power, like Pope John Paul II. He declared formally that, based on accepted and reliable evidence, "the hands of Jews are not red with the blood of Jesus Christ" (meaning all the massacres, looting, rioting and burning Jews suffered in the past for this reason, have been for nothing).

Or did the case of Mullah Mohammed Mohsen Feiz, (in the 17th Century) who upon witnessing the massacre of one hundred and fifty Jews because they did not want to become Muslims at the hands of Mohammed Beik Etemad-aldoleh in Kashan, hurriedly ran to the palace of Shah Abbas, without any fear of the dreadful consequences to himself and obtained from the Shah a decree firing Etemad Aldoleh from his position, that put an end to the madness.

Or the case of the wonderful priests, who hid many Muslim and Jewish children in Bosnia and in Germany in the basement of their church.

But, there is no assurance that a prejudiced Priest, mullah or rabbi, in order to protect and preserve his personal political or economic interests, not start brainwashing his flock against other religions. This could start a bloodbath so vast, like in Bosnia, that the UN would not dare to step in. Such things are happening as you read this in Ireland, Sudan and the Middle East

Christianity and Islam are not even mentioned in the Torah, because they came into existence respectively 1300 and 1800 years after it was written. However, there are some extremely negative statements about non-Christians while at the same time conforming Judaism. Similarly, there are shameful and dark remarks against both Jews and Christians in printed Farsi treatises, such as Jews and Christians being untouchable (najess), despite containing same common grounds with the rules and laws of Judaism,

Such writings as well as edicts put forth by some powerful religious leader have repeatedly been responsible for pogroms, massacres, as well as individual acts of religious hatred that have changed the course of history for the worst

It was not Igal Amir who assassinated Itzhak Robin, the peaceful warrior and a champion of peace. His act was a reaction to and the result of the words and speeches of the so called fanatic Jews and their like-minded fellow Jews.

It was not the Christian Serb who captured several dozens innocent Muslim children and women, locked them in a house and set the house on fire. This was the reaction to centuries of hateful religious preaching.

Yes! they did what they were told: But it was centuries of indoctrination by their preachers that triggered it during the 9/11 attack, and we shall unfortunately witness similar incidents in the future. The world should confront religion hatred because it is religion hatred that is killing people and not weapons. The World Trade Center was not destroyed by airplane. It was destroyed by religious hatred to kill more than 3,000 people even though they did not know any of them.

Once I was listening to a speech by a state senator in which he repeatedly referred to human rights. I asked him afterwards if he really believe that the UN and super-power nations really cared about human rights? When he answered that he was quite sure they did, I reminded him of the many instances that religion has. been responsible for the abuse of human rights, and mentioned the case of Solomon Rushdi as the example. I then asked whether it would be advisable to have an international law banning issuing of formal or informal religious decrees and edicts, like the one Mr. Solomon Rushdi raises?"

The Senator said, "Write this down and I shall hand it over to the proper authorities, especially the Office of Human Rights in the UN, for I, myself, am a member of the Human Rights Commission of the US Senate."

I did as he asked, but I never heard from him or about it again.

I mention this only to draw attention to the adverse effect of religious edicts on human rights. Human rights doctrine did not explain who is human. Does people who deny others life should be called human?

All inventions, discoveries and initiatives were first a simple "thought" or "hypothesis". Then later turned into amazing and admirable results. A new heaven will be born, right in this earth, the day hate, prejudice and resentment is eradicated from all religions.

A long time after sending a letter to the Senator, I read an interesting notion in the "Payam" magazine, No. 159 and I mention it here only for the sake of quoting news. In an interview with a reporter in the Davos Conference in Switzerland (on that time), Mrs. Masoomeh Ebtekar, the Vice President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, was asked by a reporter, "do. you see any conflict between Islam and Judaism?" Her answer was, "absolutely not, we are all children of Holy Abraham. I have faith that there will be a merger of all three major religions of the world, i.e. Islam, Judaism and Christianity in the new century, based on the universal belief in one God."

I read this interview several times and I convinced myself that religion cannot be forced on anybody, and challenging religious beliefs is totally useless. The only remedy is to abolish any religion hatred and discrimination, and to establish an equilibrium, a balance and conformity with the times. Destruction and nullification was the destiny of the communist regimes, which killed, burnt, and destroyed for seventy years, and tried to eradicate religion and religious beliefs. Now their successors are trying to create an equilibrium, and for this the world is welcoming them. Human being should understand that security of all is dependent on the security of every single human. Otherwise, there will be no security for anyone.

In a time not too far in the past human beings, including girls and boys, were hunted like animals and sold as slaves. No religion in the world came forward to put an absolute ban on slavery or the selling, buying and exploiting of human beings. Nobody, indeed, imagined at that time there would come a day when there would be an end to these brutal and shameful deeds, when cruelty is defeated by the intellect and rationality.

The world witnessed the abolishment of the import and export of human beings throughout the world without a credit being given to any particular religion. This was accomplished without the forces of the UN or the Human Rights Organizations or contemporary mass media. Only the force of human determination and morality was in play.

Let us look forward to the day, when all the hateful writings are eradicated and abolished, when nobody would be allowed to commit cruelty or discrimination, and when no man is imprisoned by false and whimsical judges who rely on baseless religious edicts.

Comprehending the message I am trying to deliver is more important than agreeing or disagreeing with my thoughts. I respect all readers who disagree with my ideas, but understand my message, for my main goal is 'Delivery of the Message.'

Berthold Brecht once said, "Remember us when the times comes that a man rushes to help another man and humanity supports humanity."

Let us look forward to a day when man reaches the height that no one but God can envision.