

RELIGIONS, RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE, AND RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Talk by **Mgr. George FRENDOP**



One of the greatest paradoxes of contemporary society is the strange fact that, in such a secularized world, we are becoming ever more aware of the role of religion in society. Grace Davie, Professor of Sociology of Religion at the University of Exeter, stated that to overlook religion amounts to underestimating human life itself. Indeed, religion penetrates all spheres of human life.

However, if we were to ask: «What has made us more aware of the important role of religion for society?», I think that inevitably we have to admit that, unfortunately, it is the various conflicts, in the past decades, where wars have been waged in the name of religion, and terrorist attacks are being performed in the name of God.

Since Plato and Aristotle, Western philosophy aligns religion with a concrete reality, 'the Holy', which we call God. However, the religious man was always convinced that belief in God has a bearing on his relationships with his fellowmen. In other words, religion, faith, and ethical behaviour are inter-related. One cannot ameliorate one's relationship with God without at the same time ameliorating one's relationship with others. An authentic religion teaches us how to construct a world order more worthy for mankind to live in. Authentic religions are for good relationship, for justice and peace.

It is true that religious practice is dwindling in many Western countries but that does not mean that contemporary man has become a non-believer. At the most we can say that this is a non-practising society, but not a non-believing society. Grace Davie, who first used that phrase 'believing without belonging' to depict the religious situation of contemporary Europe, illustrates her point by referring to two events: the 11th September in New York, and the sinking of the Baltic ferry, the *Estonia*, off the shores of Sweden. In both cases, where did the people go? 'Straight to their churches'. Sweden is supposedly the most secular society in Europe. Yet the people went to the churches; 'they expected the Archbishop to articulate on their behalf the meaning of that terrible event'.



When, more than a decade ago, Jacques Delors spoke of the need 'to give a soul to Europe', and when, only two years ago Nicolas Sarkozy, then Minister for the Interior in France, in his interesting book *La République, les Religions, l'Espérance* spoke of religion as furnishing man with that spiritual hope which the State cannot give, they were both, in my opinion, expressing man's unquenchable thirst for God and man's basic need to enter into communion with God. No one and nothing, not even Enver Hoxha's militant anti-theism, can eradicate man's spiritual yearning for God. Man cannot deny God

without, at the same time, denying himself. St Augustine described this yearning for God in that famous expression of his: 'You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our heart is restless, until it rests in you'.

Until only 70 years ago a definition of society necessarily included a community of ideas, which included common religious beliefs and moral standards. Religious non-conformity was allowed only so long as it was private. But we are now in an age of pluralism, not only political, but also cultural, religious, etc. and pluralism brought with it some side-effects.

First, pluralism tends to relativise moral principles and the very concept of religion itself. This eventually leads to a neutral attitude in the face of values. Secondly, pluralism has given rise to new forms of conflicts and intolerance. Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of the Hebrew communities of the British Commonwealth, in his book *The Persistence of Faith*, makes this observation: 'Pluralism leads us to expect a growth of tolerance, while in fact it lays the ground for new forms of intolerance. By dismantling and privatising the concept of a common good, it means that no one position is forced to come to terms with the reality of any other. It is no accident that as pluralism has gained ground, there has been a sharp increase in racial tension and anti-semitism'.

Can religions be sources of conflicts and intolerance? The ex-Archbishop of Canterbury Dr George Carey affirmed that religion 'is often a potent binding agent for societies and cultures, part of their fundamental sense of self. And in situations where conflicts arise between communities so defined, politicians and others will often use religion as a way of justifying and even sharpening the conflict'. And in our own times we have witnessed the truth of this statement. Just think of the conflicts in the Balkans, where religion has been instrumentalised by politicians who have given a religious physiognomy to the wars they were waging, as if these were conflicts between Muslims and Orthodox Christians.

Prince El Hassan bin Talal was certainly right when he affirmed, in the general assembly of the World Conference on Religion and Peace held in Amman, Jordan, in November 1999: 'What are described as 'religious conflicts' usually have little to do with religion and even less to do with religious doctrine'. And in a similar vein Bodo Hombach, in an address given in Budapest just one year after the conflict in Kosovo, at the time when he was Special Coordinator of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, made this bold statement: 'Peace and reconciliation are key religious themes of our times. But we should be conscious that very recently, and not at all far from here, cynical and greedy people instrumentalised religion to help fan the flames of conflict to achieve their brutal – usually in some form, economic – ends'.

Religions are expressions of belief in and communion with God, Creator of all mankind. And this lays the basis for true brotherhood and genuine peace. If in certain circumstances it would seem that this is not true, then there is a misconception or instrumentalization of religion and of God Himself. No war can ever be waged in the name of God.

Albania has always boasted of its tradition of peaceful inter-religious coexistence, and rightly so. Prior to his visit to Albania in 1993, Pope John Paul II said: 'I earnestly desire that this visit will serve to strengthen the traditional bonds of fraternal cohabitation which have characterised the relations among the different religions in your country.' And the former President of the Republic, Alfred Moisiu, in his address to Albanian Ambassadors serving in different countries, in August 2002 made this comment: 'We cannot ignore the existence of different religions in our country, rather we appreciate their role for the creation of an atmosphere of tolerance in our society. Albania can boast of the harmonious co-existence among religious communities. A fundamental characteristic of Albanian civilization is its religious tolerance, and this leaves no room for fundamentalists of any religion whatsoever.'

What is the reason for this tradition of peaceful inter-religious cohabitation in Albania. Quite often Albanians themselves answer this question by referring to a renowned Albanian author, Pashko Vasa, who said that the religion of the Albanians is 'Albanianism': religion, they say, is secondary to Albanians, so long as there is their *national* identity that unites them. Personally I do not agree with such a statement. In my opinion, Albania can boast of its peaceful inter-religious cohabitation because in its political history there has been no local politician who made use of religion for political aims.

But tolerance is the bare minimum required for a peaceful coexistence. I'm ok, you're ok; I mind my own business, and you mind yours. But religion demands more than that. It is not enough just to have a drink together with the Orthodox, Muslims, and Bektashians on the occasion of Easter or Bajram.

I here refer to a Russian Orthodox theologian, Olivier Clément, who coined the phrase *prophetic partnership*. In other words, we must make a common effort to discover the common prophetic role of our religions. And here we need to stress the importance of an inter-religious dialogue. And by 'dialogue' I do not mean a road to relativism, ideological or doctrinal compromise, or syncretism, nor just finding a way towards a passive acceptance of our 'being different', a *modus vivendi*, nor even just a peaceful co-existence. As Joseph Ellul has duly observed: the role of inter-religious dialogue 'is not that of suppressing differences, but at looking at them as a means for creating mutual understanding, respect and enrichment. It implies maintaining one's religious identity while respecting that of the other, it demands

listening as well as speaking. It is an ongoing challenge to deepen one's own faith while appreciating that of the other'.

Discovering our common prophetic role demands first of all an act of faith in the one true and living God who is love; an act of faith in our common dignity as human beings created by God in his own image; and an act of faith in our common vocation to know God, to love Him and to know He loves us and so to enter into communion with Him and listen to Him. In his message for the World Day of Peace, 1st January 2002, Pope John Paul II emphasized the specific responsibility of religious leaders, whether Christian or non-Christian. He said that they must collaborate to eradicate the social and cultural causes of terrorism and they teach the dignity of the human person and to jointly engage themselves in the promotion of peace.

I would like to conclude this talk by quoting from the final message of the Inter-religious Assembly held in the Vatican City in October 1999: 'We appeal to religious leaders to promote the spirit of dialogue within their respective communities and to be ready to engage in dialogue themselves with civil society at all levels. We appeal to all the leaders of the world, whatever their field or influence, to *refuse* to allow religion to be used to incite hatred and violence; to *refuse* to allow religion to be used to justify discrimination; to *respect* the role of religion in society at international, national and local levels; to *eradicate* poverty and strive for social and economic justice'.

I think that these words provide us with an excellent programme for further inter-religious dialogue and collaboration!



Tirana, March 25, 2015