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USING THE SPIRITUAL RESOURCES OF A MULTITRELLIGIOUS CULTURE

Sometimes, as we become immersed and inundated by reports of human suffering everywhere, of unbearable pain caused by humankind's barbarity to fellow human beings, we forget that our religious roots, the "spiritual resources of a multi-religious culture," contain the seeds of healing. All our religious traditions teach us that our primary duties on this earth are to live our lifespan with love and justice towards all of creation.

The Jewish Bible, the Jewish Tradition, which lies deep within the very soul of Christianity - since Jesus was fully a Jew on this earth, both physically and spiritually - the Jewish Holy Scriptures and Literature, offer us some guidelines. They are there for all of us, for all of humanity, if we only remember that it is our religious duty to actively search for these guidelines again and again with every new generation. According to Jewish tradition God NEEDS humankind to mend, repair (TIKKUN), complete the world, and bring about the fullness of peace in SHALOM - which is much more than a mere state of non-belligerence. It is peace achieved through the work of love, justice, and human fulfillment. It is there, somewhere beyond the horizon. And it will never be achieved without the active commitment of every living soul.

Europe, this continent which considers itself a paradigm of civilization, is today witnessing, on its very soil, crimes against humanity of the kind that were committed half a century ago, abhorrent crimes which we were naive or foolish enough to believe would never happen again. What is "ethnic cleansing" it not an emulation of the scientific genocide of the Jewish people nearly completed by the Nazis fifty years ago? The war raging in ex-Yugoslavia is right around the corner from those of us who are more fortunate, and live outside its borders.

And the hate literature being written and circulated today against so-called "foreigners", against the mingling of peoples, races, ethnic and religious groups (in England, France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Holland, Sweden - no country is immune) is instigating people to look for scapegoats again, to let out their economic, social, political and spiritual frustrations on the defenseless, once more.

Violence is not "over there", far away, somewhere in the midst of some uncivilized nation. It is right here, within our souls, in those dark corners where our innate God-given capacities for love and understanding have not been adequately nurtured.

The lawmakers and the diplomatic representatives of Europe have begun to react, in an effort to meet and quell the mounting crises of regional war, of xenophobia and the cult of exclusiveness in Europe. This is necessary, but we have found it is not sufficient. The OTHER whom we fear most, lodges within ourselves.

We speak, foolishly, of the necessity to "tolerate" the OTHER, as if mere tolerance were a virtue. Neither the Jewish Bible, nor any other religious tradition speaks of tolerance. The Torah, the Gospels, the Koran, the Baghavad Ghita, the Upanishads, the sayings of Buddha, the writings of the Bahai, the Brahma Kumaris - all the basic texts of spirituality adopt quite different criteria for human ethnics.

To cite my own - and your - tradition, let me just quote a few passages from different sections of the Jewish Bible.

In Deuteronomy, it says, "love the stranger, you who have been strangers in the land of Egypt." Here we see historical memory taking on the function of inculcat-

ing values into one's lifestyle. We are taught to identify with the experiences of those who lived generations and generations before us, and to learn from those experiences in order to become better people. The moral is very particular, very rooted, and yet at the same time, altogether universal. A specific ancestral experience that took place at one point in time becomes a message for now and the future. We are reminded of the unity of time and space, the unity of humanity, the unity of God.

We are told not to forget that we have all been strangers at one time or another. In the course of history we have all been kings and beggars, victors and vanquished. We have all been wanderers.

The history of any stretch of earth on this planet is a history of wars, the conquest of territory by force, the migrations of people as refugees, as prisoners, as slaves, or simply the meanderings of people searching for a new and better life. All our cultures are constantly in evolution. European civilization is a sum total of pluralistic contributions. It has never been monolithic and any claim to such an effect must be regarded as a myth, wishful thinking at the most, or simply a non-truth.

Further on in Deuteronomy we find detailed instructions, the applications of rules on how to treat the OTHER with consideration, fairness and justice: how to treat the other in the same way that we ourselves would like to be treated.

I quote, "Do not exploit a poor and needy worker, whether he be your brother or one of the strangers in your land. You will pay him his salary before sundown, because he is poor and awaits his salary with anxiety.... Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and that the Lord your God liberated you. When you reap your field, if you leave behind a sheaf, do not return to take it. Leave it - it will be for the stranger, the orphan, the widow.... When you reap your olive tree, don't pluck every olive from the branches; they will remain for the stranger, the orphan, the widow. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt."

And in Exodus: "Do not humiliate the stranger nor oppress him because you have been strangers in Egypt."

In Leviticus: "And if a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not humiliate him. Rather shall the stranger who dwells with you be to you like someone who was born amongst yourselves, and you shall love him as yourself: for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God... You shall institute one and the same law for the stranger and for native dwellers, for I am the Lord your God."

Can we define all this as mere "tolerance", noblesse oblige for the OTHER, for our neighbours living on the same land? Clearly the Biblical message goes far beyond our usual, unimaginative semantics. These are messages to humankind reminding us of our essential oneness, of our sameness, the interdependence of our fate and the unity of creation. We are told to love and feel for, to empathize with one another in friendship and in fairness, in justice. Genesis states, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them." There are key concepts in these words. Man was cr

eated in God's image and man was created male and female. God created "him" and "them", "Him" and "them" are interchangeable. Mankind - or shall we say - humankind - male and female - are/is One. There is no OTHER, no OUTSIDER: we are one and the same.

There are many illustrations of these concepts in Jewish tradition, often expressed through little didactic stories, pedagogic tools called "midrashim". Here's one I found recently.

"One day, a Rabbi asked his disciples: 'How does one know the precise moment when the night disappears and the day dawns - the moment when one must bless God for the creation of light?'

"One disciple said, 'When from afar one can distinguish between a palm tree and a fig tree'.

"No', replied the rabbi.

"Another said, 'when from afar one can distinguish between a dog and a kid.'

"No 'No' said the rabbi.

"Then tell us when: When does the moment come when we must bless God for the creation of light?" asked the disciples.

"The rabbi then replied, 'When from afar, in seeing a man, you recognize him as your brother, because then the night that was in your soul disappears and both your heart and his are filled with light.'"

We, as people of religious cultures, must learn to communicate better, to share the treasures of our spiritual heritage by creating a new, more adequate semantics: new, in an age-old frame of reference for human interaction.

Only a semantics that touches people in the context of our times can meet the menace of a rapidly expanding semantics of insanity, the language of injustice and violence that is raging in parts of Europe and the rest of the world and threatening to flood into countries that are presently or will soon be going through periods of economic, social and political instability.

All our religious traditions contain this spiritual potential, and what we are trying to do in this movement of the World Conference for Religion and Peace, is to create a link between these forces, to energize them, that we may grow in strength. At this moment, more than ever, we all need one another.