

The Role of Spirituality and Interfaith Dialogue in Solving the Present Crises in the Middle East

The three monotheistic religions originating in the Middle East, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, have within their histories rich resources to promote compassion, understanding, and mystical union with the divine and with all creation. The unity of God with humanity is clearly taught in the Torah, the Bible, and the Qur'an. It is only moral failure and blindness that allow human beings to attack each other and deny that we are all members of the same family originating in the heart of the HOLY ONE from which all life originated.

We have had periods of history in which each of the monotheistic religions has expressed this mystical union of creation and our Creator. Among their followers of Judaism, we have had mystical spiritual traditions and movements such as the Kabbalah and Zohar. Other expressions of mysticism can be found in the Franciscan creation spirituality tradition and Sufi orders in Islam. These movements were often popular among diverse segments of the religious bodies they represented and became social movements in the larger societies where they became influential and popular. The underlying principle in many spiritual traditions is the search for the divine within the created order whether in Nature or the depths of one's Soul.

There is some similarity between the Hindu spirituality which unites the Divine (**Brahman**) with the human Soul (**Atman**). The existence of evil in these mystical traditions can be understood as a form of illusion or projection of the mind that has lost touch with its true essence. When evil becomes identified with a particular group or ideology, it can lead to attempts to eradicate it through violence and denial of its claim to existence. Some forms of political and religious extremism have taken root for periods of time in the history of the monotheistic religions, but they have not become normative in any one of them. Most of the extremist influences in the Middle East are rooted in political ideologies that divide rather than unite humanity. They have lost touch with the mystical roots of their religious traditions and rely on power and compulsion

for adherence to their policies and prescriptions including power over the teaching of religion and appointment of religious leaders,

The 2010 Arab Spring in Egypt and other parts of the Middle East did challenge this control by the political leaders in this region. I was in Egypt in January of 2010 with a large delegation of faculty and students from Bay Area colleges and universities. We visited most of the historic archaeological sites in Egypt and met with students and faculty from Egyptian colleges and universities. We concluded our time in Egypt with seminars on interreligious dialogue at Al Azhar University in Cairo. The Egyptian students were very open to speaking with us and requested that we meet informally the following day. I did not observe any apprehensions about entering dialogue with us. I met with some of the students and faculty from Al Azhar University again in 2015 at the Parliament of Religions global conference in Salt Lake City, Utah. It is no accident that Al Azhar University has become prominent in the interreligious dialogue of Sunni Islam with the Vatican and Pope Francis.

In 2021 and 2023 Global Ministries University co-sponsored a global interreligious Dialogue conference with the Tangaza University Institute of Interreligious Dialogue and Islamic Studies in Nairobi. Interreligious Dialogue assumes the capacity of human beings to understand and care for each other. Creating these forums throughout the Middle East can help restore civility in communication and provide a basis for peace and living together without further violent conflicts. Global Ministries University seeks to work cooperatively with interfaith leaders in the US, Africa, India, and the Middle East to promote new platforms for interfaith understanding and cooperative endeavors,

The people of the Middle East deserve a future that is based on the highest ideals of the monotheistic religions that have informed the cultures of this region. We hope that religious and civic leaders in the Middle East can find new hope through their mystical traditions that affirm our common origin in the Divine that provide s a foundation for interreligious dialogue and understanding while living together in peace.

Gerald Grudzen, PhD

Prayer for Peace in Our World

Divine Presence,

who is enshrined in every beating heart and reflected in every face on this beleaguered and bereaved planet,

help us to realize that you are not out there, up there, or in any way elsewhere from us.

You are within us—all of us—with no exceptions or exclusions.

Religions and nationalities are distinctions and divisions we impose upon ourselves.

You are wholeness abiding in all-inclusive love.

Help us see your reflection in each other and listen to our hearts.

Show us the path to peace lies not in military conquest or dominance, nor political expediency,

but in the recognition that we *are one in you*

and that hurting each other annihilates the manifestation of your will

and extinguishes your reflection in others and in ourselves.

May we come to this realization and commit ourselves to compassion.

May we resolve to live our lives *in You* and in the light of your abiding love.

Only then will we know Shalom, Salaam, мир (Мир), Peace!

So Be It!