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Middle East



Why religion is part of the solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict

by Dr. Ben Mollov
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JERUSALEM - It is frequently asserted that bringing religion into the Arab-Israeli conflict will undermine any potential for resolving it. While a limited secular political conflict can be resolved, so the logic goes, religion invariably involves non-negotiable ideologies that complicate matters exponentially.

However, bringing religion into the Arab-Israeli conflict cannot be avoided. It already is part of the conflict and has been from its inception even if in the public discourse the deeper cultural and religious roots of the conflict are usually omitted.

The Arab-Israeli conflict is a function of a parallel renewal by both Jews and Arabs of an earlier "heroic era" that has become central to the narratives of both sides. Both stories are steeped in religious and cultural significance and must, therefore, be made integral to any conflict resolution process.

The cultural and religious roots of the conflict

The Zionist movement was a reaction to two thousand years of exile and persecution. The solution it proposed was that the Jewish people had to undergo a process of renewal inspired by Jewish life in the Land of Israel in biblical times. Although many early Zionists rejected traditional Jewish practices which they associated with passivity, they were steeped in the ethos of the Bible which was at the foundation of their longing for the Land of Israel and motivated their efforts to revive the Hebrew language. An entirely new cultural paradigm was created of a proud Jew who could farm the land and, if necessary, defend it like in biblical times. The new Jews set out to develop a modern progressive society which at the same time harked back to the moral legacy of the Hebrew Prophets.

In parallel, the Arab awakening, also occurring in the 19th century, sought to inspire the Arab peoples with the memory of the Golden Age of the Arab-Islamic empire between the seventh to tenth centuries. It was intended to replace the more recent memories of subjugation by outside powers and counter the prevailing feeling that Arab-identity was no longer a source of pride. Central to this revival was an increased focus on Arabic language and literature inspired by the Golden Age which also has roots in the Islamic heritage. The Arab nationalist movement - the political expression of this deeper process - combined both religious and nationalist themes. It looked upon the nascent Zionist movement as an intrusion in a region which they

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perceived as exclusively theirs based on this historic memory of empire and previous control.

The two movements began to collide in the 20th century as their conflicting visions and narratives regarding the same land were made more acute by powerful demographic and political dynamics.

In 2009 this same conflict of narratives –which I believe is motivated by religious identity - still lies at the basis of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A purely secular discourse is unable to address these deeper roots. For any conflict resolution process to be meaningful it must address and somehow reconcile these conflicting narratives. Indeed, there is greater urgency to this approach especially in light of the fact that both the Jewish religious community of Israel and the Islamic communities in the Arab world have grown stronger and more self confident in recent years.

A religious and culturally-based strategy

I began my own work on Israeli-Palestinian dialogue in the 1990s by involving my students at Bar-Ilan, a Jewish religious university, in discussions with Palestinian students from the University of Hebron, an Islamic institution. For over five years students met on a regular basis and in a fascinating manner found religion as a basis for common ground. They discovered the very similar structure and practices of Islam and Judaism. Finding great similarities in the practice of prayer, mourning, even bioethics, for example helped “humanise” each side to the other. Students then had the opportunity to discuss more divisive political issues but in a calmer, more thoughtful environment.

This approach was bolstered by research findings from a study with my colleague in social psychology, Dr. Chaim Lavie, conducted in Khan Younis, Gaza in 1999. The questionnaire-based data gathered during an inter-religious event devoted to the theme of prayer involving primarily Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arab Muslims showed that the inter-religious approach could have a favourable impact on the perceptions of those who were most religious and therefore presumably most hostile towards the other. Even today while teaching and speaking about these issues, I encounter fellow religious Jewish-Israelis who are eager to offer anecdotal evidence that demonstrates how religion has been a bridge to the Palestinian side.

Finding such commonalities, although worthwhile is only a first step to a deeper process. The second step, which the first facilitates, entails identifying the religious and cultural basis of each side's attachment to the same land. This realisation can lead to an escalation of conflict; but it can also open the door to an understanding that both sides will have to accommodate the existence of the other. This can happen despite the fact that in the earlier “heroic periods” the other side did not exist. The Jewish civilisation in the Land of Israel during the time of the Bible existed before the rise of Islam, and during the Arab-Islamic empire the Jews were no longer an active, independent political force in the region.

There is also a third step in the process, which involves the more elevated, transcendent hopes within religions such as the striving for human dignity, righteousness and peace. A discussion on this higher plane can encourage both Israelis and Palestinians, not to relinquish their respective narratives and aspirations, but to see the building of the Holy Land as a common animating theme that can be pursued collaboratively.

Thus a religiously based strategy works on several levels. It can encourage Israelis and Palestinians to identify cultural commonalities, which can, in turn, improve mutual perceptions. These could open the way to a deeper exploration of their ties to the same land. Finally, transcendent religious values can motivate a vision for a worthy life in the Holy Land, and serve as the underpinnings of a political process. Such an approach can reach places that purely secular conflict management approaches cannot and therefore must be taken seriously by policymakers engaged in the peace process.

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