CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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Protecting religious freedom should be a priority for all democracies

Milan

Thursday 10 November 2011
There will be no peace in our world without an understanding of the place of religion within it. This is disconcerting for political and religious leaders. The politicians feel uncomfortable in debating religion [remember ‘We don’t do God’!]—it is off our beaten track of financial crisis, security challenges, healthcare, education, welfare. It pitches us into an unfamiliar realm where we suspect, rightly, many nasty swamps of controversy are located. Religious leaders often have political views and often express them strongly; but they so as people of faith driven to talk politics; not usually as participants in a debate about Faith itself.

However, the past decade has seen many convenient myths which disguised the importance of religion, stripped away. For many Europeans brought up in the 1960s and 1970s there was a single equation: as society progressed, religion would decline. It hasn’t happened. The global numbers of those espousing a faith has increased and what’s more has increased even in many nations enjoying strong prospects of development. The doubling of the population of the Arab world predicted over the next 25-30 years alone will mean a substantial rise in the numbers of Muslims. But actually high birth rates in countries such as Indonesia (now twice the rate of Italy) and with a population three times that of Germany will add to these numbers substantially. Latin America is seeing a big boost to evangelical Christianity. And every year here in Italy millions will gather to see and hear the Holy Father, who continues to draw crowds the world over (including in the UK) that dwarf those of any politician.

Then there are those that insisted that as the Arab Revolution knocked over long established regimes and created movements for democracy, so those societies’ religiosity would take second place to the new politics. It hasn’t happened, as the strong showing of the Muslim Brotherhood indicates. Religion is fundamental to those societies and if anything, in the foreseeable future, will become more so.

Out in the Middle East, where I have just returned from my 73rd visit since leaving office, I see the perils of ignoring the religious dimension to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. This dispute is not only about territory. It is about culture and faith and the competing narratives around faith. Do we seriously think the issue of Jerusalem can be resolved without at least some discussion of its religious significance to all three Abrahamic faiths? I understand the natural political inclination to say: “oh it’s not really about religion you know, it’s really political”; but it’s simply not true unless we just decide for reasons of our own convenience, to ascribe a motivation to people other than the one they say they have, which itself is a weird way to interpret politics.
This is especially so when considering the unpalatable fact that ten years on from 9/11, the virus of terror based on a perversion of the proper faith of Islam, shows no signs of abating. It has been present in Iraq and Afghanistan seeking to destabilise those countries long march to freedom and democracy. It is a daily news item in countries from India and Pakistan to Nigeria, Somalia and Kenya to even the far away state of the Philippines. It remains a threat to our own security and has necessitated the spending of countless billions in protection and changes to the way we live. It is a feature of elements who are active in the Israel/Palestine issue.

And it is not only the acts of terror that should alarm us. It is the extremism that promotes persecution of religious minorities or for example the assassination of political figures in Pakistan who want to change blasphemy laws and even worse the celebration of their killers by large numbers of Pakistani citizens.

The challenge is no less strong for those accustomed only to denounce the persecution of Christians, for example under the abuse of Muslim blasphemy laws, while remaining silent about the persecution of other religious minorities. The vast majority of people of faith suffering from government restrictions or social hostility around the world are Christians and Muslims. It is simply a reflection of the numbers making up their overall global populations. In the Middle East and North Africa recent statistics from the Pew Research Centre indicate that marginally more Muslims are suffering harassment and persecution than Christians, albeit usually at the hands of fellow Muslims.

This is, of course, part of a far wider problem. The same Pew Research Center report described this as a problem exacerbated by some states themselves. Covering the period between 2006 and 2009, it indicated that there were double the countries suffering from increased government restrictions and social hostility compared to those experiencing a decrease. This phenomenon is not going away.

The challenge is that much greater where human dignity is not respected and freedom of religion denied. This results in a general oppression of people of faith in several of the central Asian states, in the south Caucasus, and, of course, in North Korea. It means we must support Muslims in Gujarat, India, non-Orthodox Christians in Moldova, Bahai’s in Iran, Ahmadis in Pakistan, all Christians in North Africa, Hindus in Sri Lanka, Shi’a in several Sunni majority countries, and other places. All have suffered, in some measure, from different forms of discrimination, from glass ceilings to harassment, to persecution and systematic repression.
But the basic point about the world is this: On every side, in every quarter, wherever we look and analyse, religion is a powerful, motivating, determining force shaping the world around us.

For some, this is final proof of the iniquity of religious faith. The answer they say is to abandon it. As the Pope brilliantly argued in his recent speech on Faith, delivered in Assisi: the perversion of religion and the practice of violence in respect of it, then brings forth a different type of aggression, which is a secularism that wants to discredit, even destroy, the very idea of Faith and belief in God.

Yet this, too, is a futile endeavour. For millions of people, faith is not measured in prejudice, intolerance or violence; but in love, compassion, a desire for and a striving for a more just and humane world. This – the true face of faith – is what compels the Church to be so active in the provision of healthcare in Africa, saving countless thousands of lives; or brings the Unione Superiore Maggiore d’Italia together to fight the evil of people trafficking.

It is this belief in a higher purpose, God’s purpose for us and this yearning for spiritual as well as material fulfilment that draws people to profess their faith so strongly; and in an era of globalisation particularly in the aftermath of the financial crisis, makes them assert the civilising force of faith in the modern world. Humanity without Faith would be deeply impoverished, even if we materially advanced. Globalisation without values and the sense of equity and justice they bring, often derived from Faith in God, risks producing the very type of crisis we are now witnessing, whose consequences may only just be beginning.

So the time has come to put away the delusions: that faith is diminishing; that religion is not really what it’s about; that a debate about politics can be seriously conducted in the 21st Century without debating religion. And debating religion not as social science, foreign affairs or even psychology, but as religion.

For this to happen, religious and secular, religious and political people need to start talking with each other. For, as globalisation pushes the world together-online, through the internet, in person through migration-the necessity of finding ways for people of different faiths to co-exist peacefully becomes urgent.
The correct and welcome push towards greater democracy round the globe increases the urgency. We need religion-friendly democracy and democracy-friendly religion. We need to examine and debate the rules by which those of faith participate in democratic debate. I offer here a third way. Those of us inspired by our faith must have the right to speak out on issues that concern us and in the name of beliefs derived from our faith. At the same time our voice cannot predominate over the basic democratic system that functions equally for all, irrespective of their faith or regardless of whether they are of faith at all.

In turn, this should lead to a vital debate about the nature of democracy, a debate all the more critical as we witness the revolutions of Arabia and North Africa. Personally I don’t think there is a proper concept of democracy called Islamic or Christian democracy. I can contemplate democracies that are in predominantly Muslim countries like Turkey; or predominantly Christian like Italy. Though people of faith do, and should, seek to harmonise their political vision and religious convictions and traditions, I find it hard to define democracy by reference to one Faith. The essence of democracy is that it is pluralistic, that it treats people of all faiths equally and that it derives its rules from the will of the people. It is inherently secular, even if rooted in cultures that are profoundly religious. This is where democracy-friendly religion really means something very important in the way society is governed.

From this point stems a set of attributes of democracy on which we should insist. Democracy is not just about a system for voting in or out the government. It is not just about the freedom to vote. It is about free media; freedom of expression; and about freedom of religion. It is also, in my view, about an independent judiciary and the rule of law and even about free markets albeit with appropriate Government intervention and regulation.

It is, in other words, as much an attribute of mind as much as a technical system of decision making.

This attitude is open-minded, open to the world, to others, to diversity, to difference. The alternative is the closed mind, those who see globalisation only as a threat and who see difference as a danger and diversity as a weakness. The closed mind uses democracy; it doesn’t believe in it.

The honouring of religious minority rights and a healthy religious pluralism is a core aspect of democracy and it is a core dimension of the open-minded. Democracy has a check list of government accountability, the electoral possibility of getting rid of a government because a majority of voters are
opposed to its policies, respect for citizen’s rights. A state needs to fulfil them to claim that it is democratic. Political pluralism and religious pluralism, it seems to me, go together.

In the case of my own Church the struggle took place very early in my own lifetime just before and during the second Vatican Council. Outdated philosophical ideas were abandoned and the language of human rights adopted. So there is a precedent for those many Muslim leaders deeply concerned at the intellectual impoverishment of their faith and eager in the context of the Arab Spring to make justice the true end of government again.

The challenges are thus made very clear. Religion matters. Faith motivates and compels. If democracy is to function effectively therefore, religion itself has to embrace the open mind not the closed mind. Otherwise it starts to wrench democracy away from its moorings and create the basis for conflict between those of different faiths and with the secular.

The minds behind the use of religion to justify violence or prejudice are the closed minds. They regard those who do not believe as they do, as infidels, outcasts, even those within their own Faith that differ from them. Against this closed minded attitude has to be placed an idea of Faith that is open to others: I have my faith, I keep my faith; but I am prepared to respect that you have yours and have an equal right to practice it and believe in it. That is the only way the world can work and democracy take root. Without this attitude of mind, religion becomes a source of conflict.

As globalisation shrinks the world and pushes it together, those of different faiths perforce live side by side; and whether they jostle each other, in friction and tension with each other, or get along and learn from each other, determines world peace.

Now I come to the conclusion of this analysis. This open attitude of mind cannot be inculcated by politicians alone. It needs to be advocated by people of faith. If people of faith are asked to be open to others but that ask does not come from those within their faith, the risk is very simple: they think they are being asked to choose between their faith and their politics. They need to know not just that an open attitude to others is a “good thing” for politics but that it is fully consistent with their faith; that their Faith and their Reason are aligned.
That is why this task can’t be left only to politics. It has to be undertaken, in part at least by those of faith. They have to provide a) the platform of interfaith understanding and respect; and b) the theological and scriptural justification for the open mind.

It is here that the designing and embedding of protective constitutional provisions will not be enough. With the best will in the world, they will remain paper aspirations if religious and government leaders do not educate their constituencies in religious minority rights.

They must reflect the same “inherent dignity of all members of the human family” that the United Nations spoke of in 1948 and is the basis of human rights cultures today. But a commitment to human dignity means concrete action: the training of law enforcement officers to uphold these values, teaching from primary school upwards of respect and understanding for people of other faiths, religious literacy in the world’s faiths for national leaders.

This undeniably presents an enormous challenge to religious leaders: to draw from their own traditions and sacred texts the values and vision that will create this culture of democracy. The question whether the truth-claims of the monotheistic religions draw them inevitably into intransigent, non-negotiable, positions is a real one. But it is the interpretation of these truth-claims that is the problem; the repeated human desire to claim that God is on our side, that we have formed the Party of God, that our human frailty, cruelty and inhumanity is sanctioned by God. The arrogance behind that is surely the true meaning of blasphemy.

That is the reason I began my Foundation. Without inter-faith understanding, the exclusivist and closed-minded attitude is allowed free occupation of the religious space in politics. But this is where I and others like me in politics, need help. It is where religious leaders must step forward and engage.

This whole area to do with faith and its effect on the world’s geo-politics has to be taken to an entirely different, bigger and sharper level of inquiry and debate. It has to be overt, clear and out in the public domain visible to the people. It must be present in our universities, in our schools, where education about others is so crucial and in the arena of political exchange. In that arena we need to treat religion as religion not as a sub set of politics.
Finally, were this to happen, there would, in my view be one major and positive consequence for faith itself. It would allow those of us of faith whether as in my case the Christian faith or in the case of others, their different faiths, to discuss and proclaim what our faith means to us, why Faith and Reason go hand in hand and how we feel Faith enriches our lives and guides them, however sinful we are. It would open up the potential of Faith to many who at present search for spiritual meaning but have come to regard the practice of Faith as the preserve of the irrational, the superstitious and the prejudiced. It would allow a true and rational belief in God to direct the path of the 21st Century. That is where Faith belongs. And why the world needs it.