

Religion can be a bridge or a wall

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The Lebanese have a proverb: *Kul wahad a'la dino, Allah ya'ino*. "To each his religion - God help him." This wry piece of folk wisdom might be translated: "In matters of faith, expect people to be biased; mere humans simply cannot be expected to arrive at a balanced view of religion."

Religion is, in fact, a formidable force of identity; it develops in our personalities during childhood, quickly becoming second nature. We are not necessarily aware of its influence on our daily life. Religion can become a bridge of understanding among people or a wall of separation, depending on whether the guiding force in the faith is unconditional love or unconditional literal dogma. Children learn fanaticism by imitating adults.

When our son was seven, he asked me if Jesus was better than Muhammad. I froze, thought for a bit, and told him, "You know God through Christ and a Muslim child knows God through the Prophet Muhammad."

He was satisfied. All too often, though, due to ignorance, political insecurity, or the misinterpretation of scripture, children are taught that other people's beliefs are lies. Children who are thus indoctrinated build a mental wall around their community and start to think of people from other religions as dangerous. This form of prejudice is quite common, even in societies where racism, sexism and nationalistic chauvinism are generally rejected.

When I worked for the World Council of Churches, one theologian once shared a candid thought with me: "In a sense, literal religion is fratricidal by structure."

He meant that when dogma is taken too literally, it carries the seeds of violence, which are all too easily exploited by those in political power. This is nowhere more apparent than in the Middle East. Centuries of political intimidation have convinced most Arabs to avoid critical thinking in interpreting the sacred word. Religious authorities- both Christian, Jewish and Moslem - have consistently reinforced their power over their communities by forbidding genuine and full dialogue among communities of faith. Meanwhile, Israel's national and foreign policy is explicitly articulated around religious narratives. Fanaticism made my family refugees in 1975, and still deters us from returning to resettle in Lebanon. Religious fanaticism also explains why Palestinians and Jews do not live in one state, or even in two parallel states. Israel's so-called Security Wall might well be renamed the "Insecurity Wall", as it is only the geographic dramatization of a psychological reality.

It was in Northern Ireland in 1983, where I lectured on Lebanon in a non-violence international seminar, that I came across the expression "Religion is a badge of identity".

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But religious fanaticism is rampant in my adoptive country, the US, too. The US, though proud of its open society, harbors a thriving televangelical industry which markets Jehovah like any other commodity, by brazenly comparing Him to the competition- Allah in particular. Such fanaticism, in addition to being dangerous, defeats the very purpose of religion, which is to provide a meaning to our lives. Children should be taught that the supreme being cannot be fully understood, much less claimed by any nation, race, geography or culture. To each his religion- and God help us explain it to our children.