Religious Pluralism and Tolerance: The Bahrain Model

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(On March 4, 2016, a Conference was held at the United Nations: “Religious Pluralism and Tolerance: The Bahrain Model.” It was held under the sponsorship of the Kingdom of Bahrain, which prides itself on tolerance to citizens of its religious minorities. The Conference was opened by H.E. Dr. Shaikh Abdulla bin Ahmed bin Abdulla Al Khalifa, the Undersecretary of International Affairs of the Bahrain Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Participants in the Conference included representatives of various religions and countries, as well as members of the American government.

Among the invited speakers at the conference was Rabbi Marc D. Angel, Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. Here is a transcript of Rabbi Angel’s remarks.)

I was born and raised in Seattle, Washington, as were both of my parents. My grandparents had come to Seattle early in the 20th century from towns in Turkey. My ancestors had lived in the old Ottoman Empire since the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492. Spanish religious intolerance at that time was counter-balanced by Ottoman religious tolerance.

In Seattle, Jews were a tiny minority of the general population. Sephardic Jews — who had come to Seattle from Turkey and Rhodes — were a relatively small minority within the city’s Jewish population. My grandparents, like the other Sephardic immigrants, spoke Judeo-Spanish as their mother tongue. I thought it was perfectly natural and normal to grow up in Seattle with Turkish-born grandparents who spoke a medieval form of Spanish!

Aside from being part of a small minority of Sephardic Jews in Seattle, our family also was religiously traditional and most closely identified with Orthodox Judaism. Orthodoxy is a small minority among American Jews, consisting of perhaps 10% of American Jewry. Although I was a member of an extraordinarily minute segment of humanity, I learned to love my family's traditions. I eventually became an Orthodox Sephardic rabbi, and an author of many works relating to Sephardic and Orthodox Jewish law, history, and worldview. Indeed, my life has been based on the truth and vitality of my religious beliefs and traditions.

I strive to live according to the truth of my faith. Yet, I also am struck by a massive reality: I am part of a Sephardic Orthodox Jewish community that represents an infinitesimal percentage of humanity. There are at least seven billion other human beings who live according to their faiths, and who know little or nothing about mine. If I have the true way of life — one for which I am willing to live and die — how am I to relate to the overwhelming majority of human beings who do not share my faith?

Growing up as an Orthodox Sephardic Jew in Seattle, I learned very early in life that I had to be very strong in my faith and traditions in order to avoid being swallowed up by the overwhelming majority cultures. I also learned the importance of theological humility. It simply would make no sense to claim that I had God's entire Truth and that seven billion human beings were living in spiritual darkness. I surely believed — and do believe — that I have a profound religious truth that guides my life. But I also believed — and do believe — that all human beings have equal access to God, since God has created each one of us in God's image.

Some years ago, I read a parable (in the writings of Dr. Pinchas Polonsky) that helped me clarify my thinking. Imagine that you have carefully studied a painting day after day, year after year. You know every brush-stroke, color, shadow… you know every detail of the painting and you understand it to the extent humanly possible. And then, one day someone comes along and turns on the light. You then realize that the painting you had studied to perfection is actually part of a much larger canvas. As you stand back, you realize that you need to re-evaluate your thinking. The segment of the canvas that you have studied all these years has not changed; you still know every detail; it is still absolutely true. Yet, you must now study your truth in context of a much larger canvas.

Each faith, at its best, has a very true understanding of its piece of the larger canvas. But when the lights go on, each faith must come to realize that it represents part of the picture but not the whole picture. A grand religious vision

must necessarily entail a grand perception of God: God is great enough to create and love all human beings. God sees the whole canvas of humanity in its fullness.

One of the great challenges facing religions is to see the full picture, not just our particular segment of it. While being fully committed to our faiths, we also need to make room for others. We need, in a sense, to see humanity from the perspective of God, to see the entire canvas not just individual segments of it.

Religious vision is faulty when it sees one, and only one, way to God. Religious vision is faulty when it promotes forced conversions, discrimination against "infidels," violence and murder of those holding different views. How very tragic it is that much of the anti-religious persecution that takes place in our world is perpetrated by people who claim to be religious, who claim to be serving the glory of God.

While religion today should be the strongest force for a united, compassionate and tolerant humanity, it often appears in quite different garb. Religion is too often identified with terrorism, extremism, superstition, exploitation…and hypocrisy. People commit the most heinous crimes…and do so while claiming to be acting in the name of God.

It is very heartening and encouraging that we are meeting here today at the United Nations, under the sponsorship of the Kingdom of Bahrain to discuss religious pluralism and tolerance. In this room, we have representatives of various religions and different countries. That we speak together in friendship and fellowship is highly important. This meeting itself is a model, a microcosm, of how religions should interact throughout the world. Our voice should be one of mutual understanding; we should remind ourselves and our fellow religionists that God loves all human beings and wants all human beings to be blessed with happy and good lives. There is room for all of us on this earth. We need to foster a religious vision that is humble, thoughtful, and appreciative of the greatness of God.

I thank the sponsors of this conference for having invited me to speak this morning, as Founder and Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. I founded this Institute in 2007 with the goal of fostering an intellectually vibrant, compassionate and tolerant Orthodox Judaism. Our Institute promotes a grand religious vision that eschews extremism, authoritarianism, sectarianism and obscurantism. It views religious tradition as a way of coming closer to the Universal God of all humankind…and of bringing human beings closer together in mutual understanding and respect. The world needs many such Institutes among the various religions of humanity, so that all of us together can raise our voices

for a religious world-view that not only respects our fellow human beings…but that respects God as the One who created all of us and who makes room for each of us in the Divine plan.

The great Talmudic sage, Hillel, asked the eternal question: if not now, when? If we do not seize this moment to espouse a visionary religious world-view, when will such a world-view come to prevail? If not now, when? If not us, who?