

Interreligious Relations and Advocacy in a Culture of Violence
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Thank you, Rabbi Balinski, for that kind introduction. Like the other speakers I have been given a nearly impossible task this morning to speak to you on a topic which could absorb many hours, days and weeks of reflection. Instead like the other speakers I shall content myself to a couple of initial statements which may hopefully offer some insight on the topic at hand. My assignment is to reflect on our common topic from the Catholic perspective of Christianity.

Our seminary runs a study pilgrimage each year to Israel, the West Bank and Jordan. Each year, beginning in the first week of December, our third year seminarians depart for ten weeks of bible study and to pilgrimage visits to the sacred sights in what we Christians refer to as the Holy Land. As you probably remember towards the end of November there were serious issues between the State of Israel and Gaza. Many rockets were shot into Israeli territory and the alarming fact was that the militants in Gaza had somehow acquired much more effective missiles capable of reaching deeper into Israel than ever before. Military action was the inevitable result and, as is customary, all the major electronic media outlets played the same scenes of explosions and devastation day after day after day. Even some weeks after the actual hostilities had concluded, the small screen was filled with these same images.

As we approached the Thanksgiving holiday, when our graduate students would be returning home for that American celebration, we were faced with the challenge of an ever increasing anxiety in the students themselves, certainly among their parents and also among their sponsoring bishops. They viewed the situation on the ground as dangerous because that is what they saw on television. They assumed that we were being irresponsible for continuing with the program. No amount of reassurance from people actually on the ground, where the sun was shining and no hostile activity were taking place, could shake the images that remained in their minds because of the television coverage. I found myself in one conversation with a person particularly disturbed about our plan to go ahead and send the students to the Middle East which is instructive on our topic today. In that conversation, I was trying to give a perspective on the relative safety, so I said: "the places that we are going are perfectly safe, in fact it is far safer to be in the Middle East right now than in certain neighborhoods of Chicago."

My comparative remark from Thanksgiving time proved all the more prophetic. Now, several months later, the situation in the Middle East is much more stable but the instability and the violence which I used as a comparison has continued unabated in the Windy City. In fact, the recent tragic killing of Hadiya Pendleton only makes the situation all the more difficult. To have such a promising young person killed in such violence is senseless. And the fact that she was from President Obama's home neighborhood of Kenwood places Chicago center stage in the national news. It is

accurate to say that this city has become as the image for gun violence. The political cartoons alone prove this point.

For any of us who understand ourselves as Chicagoans, this story brings a matter of violence home quite quickly. As I reflect my thoughts turn to the senselessness of such violence locally, nationally and internationally. And the very senselessness of this violence reveals a cause. Violence is an example of irrationality.

Pope Benedict the XVI as Cardinal Ratzinger delivered a speech on the anniversary of the allied landing at Normandy. In that talk, he reflected on the question of war and peace, religion and violence. His basic premise is that God, as reason, is the one who provides the ground for the reasonableness of the world and the reasonableness of our being human.¹

In that speech he noted in a particular way that one can see a convergence between the Semitic- monotheistic religions; Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as well as the religions of Asia such as Daoism and Confucianism.² A convergence is apparent in the longing humans have for something beyond the human person and beyond human effort which provides reasonableness for our being. Then Cardinal Ratzinger affirmed that, in the Bible, one can find a unity of faith and reason and the basis for religious faith's universal rationality. As a Christian, I see the synthesis of philosophical reason and content-filled faith revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. As a citizen, I believe the

See Emery de Gaal, *The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI: The Christocentric Shift* (San Francisco: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2011), 269.

Ibid.

synthesis of reason and faith is most important today because society needs both the problem of violence is to be addressed.

The title we were given for today's talks refers to a culture of violence. Culture is a very interesting reality in human society. Later on this morning we are going to hear from an esteemed representative of law enforcement, State's Attorney Anita Alvarez. I am grateful for her presence because one of the responses to violence must be sensible laws and effective law enforcement. Her holistic approach which we will hear about is welcome. Now, the law makes an indispensable contribution to society. But law alone is incapable of providing an ethical basis for society. Law and law enforcement alone cannot establish what culture fails to provide. In any society where the sources of culture are weakened, inevitably there is a kind of social breakdown, a breakdown that leads inevitably to violence.

In that speech at Normandy, which was the site of one of the worst moments of violence in human history, Joseph Ratzinger noted that without the unity of reason and faith, religion become un-moderated and can turn to ideology and human reason become a merely pragmatic approach which loses its ability to call people to virtue. Both extremes divide people.

I have spent over thirty years working in both interreligious dialogue and with some very successful church and nonprofit organizations. One thing I have learned is that both religion and the state have distinct responsibilities and roles which are not interchangeable. At the same time, they cannot be autonomous. The state cannot provide a ground for culture. I think everyone will admit that a breakdown of culture

contributes to the kind of violence we are seeing in the city. Social scientists tell us that religion, language and a society together form a dynamic tripod upon which a culture finds its support.

The topic we have been given as part of World Interfaith Harmony week reads, “We are all connected by compassion.” I would argue that this statement is true if and only if, we know the virtues from which compassion arises. This is the role of religion in forming the ethical basis of a culture. I would go further to say that compassion is only possible if I know the Other personally. I must be able to speak to her or him, to be understood and to understand. This is the role of language. And we must share community which is the irreducible essence of society. Social scientists talk about the three “B’s” - belonging, behaving and believing.

My recommendation then as we confront a culture of violence is simply this: Don’t just start some new program. Rather focus on deepening and strengthening the relationships and institutions of society, especially the voluntary institutions. Focus on breaking down the various autonomies which prevent the tripod of religion, language and society from supporting our culture. Seek the relationships which will enable each element of our community-- religion, the state, voluntary organizations, schools and the family to contribute their essential parts to the whole. Thank you.

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