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The Witness of the Monotheistic Religions

Cover Page Footnote

Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald is President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. This talk was delivered on April 28, 2003, as the Annual Lecture hosted by the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding of Sacred Heart University, on the eve of a conference sponsored by the CCJU titled ``Pathways to Peace in the Abrahamic Faiths.''

MICHAEL FITZGERALD

The Witness of the Monotheistic Religions

On the eve of a symposium which brings together scholars from three traditions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, it is good to talk about monotheism. Yet it might be well to remember that these three are not the only monotheistic religions. One should not forget the Sikh dharma, which is definitely monotheistic in its teachings. If a link is sought between the three religions that concern us here, it is certainly better to use the term Abrahamic religions, as has been done in the title of the conference. Each of the traditions takes pride in connecting itself with Abraham, and although there are significant variations, Abraham is presented as a model of faith and of witness to the one God.

Divine Unicity

Let us dwell for a moment on this concept of divine unicity. Some people tend to assert that Jews, Christians, and Muslims do not adore the same God. This is certainly not the teaching of the Catholic Church. The Second Vatican Council, in its central document, the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*, stated clearly: "But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place among whom are the Muslims; these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and

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together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind's judge on the last day" (*LG*, 16). This did not even have to be stated with regard to Judaism, for God's dealings with the chosen people form, as it were, the pre-history of Christianity and the Church cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament by way of the people with whom God, in his inexpressible mercy, established the ancient covenant" (*Nostra Aetate*, 4).

Each tradition has a liturgical expression of this primary article of faith. Judaism makes use of the *Shema*: "Listen, Israel . . . I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no gods except me" (Deuteronomy 5:1, 6-7). Christians proclaim, *Credo in unum Deum*, "I believe in one God." Muslims, at every ritual prayer (*salât*), recite the *shahâda*: *Lâ ilâha illâ Llâh*: "There is no divinity except God."

There are, of course, differences in the way of understanding this God. For the first of these religions, God has chosen one single people to bear witness before the world. For Christians, God has become incarnate, and in so doing has shown his solidarity with the whole of the human race that he has created. It is through the incarnate Son of God that the Trinitarian nature of God comes to be known. For Muslims, such a Trinitarian concept would seem to destroy the essential unicity of God. Moreover God's transcendence would exclude the possibility of incarnation. But God has raised up within each people a prophet to remind them of their primordial covenant with him. He has finally sent Muhammad to be the Seal of Prophecy and a mercy (*rahma*) for the whole of humanity.

We are dealing then with three distinct religions, and indeed the differences are to be found at the very heart of that which unites them, faith in the one God. Moreover these three traditions have seen their boundaries defined through historical development. Christianity did not set out to be a distinct religion, but it separated itself from Judaism, perhaps not without anguish. Islam discovered that Jews and Christians did not accept its message, and had to come to terms with the continued existence of their communities. So the three traditions have to co-exist, leaving it to God to resolve their differences in his own good time.

Despite the differences in understanding, the common faith in the unicity of God remains. This means a refusal of any sort of dualistic

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vision of the world. Good and Evil do certainly exist, but they are not two co-equal principles that are eternally struggling one with the other. We know too that we cannot really divide good and evil into two distinct camps. We are conscious that in each one of us these two forces exist. Saint Paul has described in vivid terms this inward conflict:

I cannot understand my own behavior. I fail to carry out the things I want to do, and I find myself doing the very things I hate. . . . The fact is, I know of nothing good living in me – living, that is, in my un-spiritual self – for though the will to do good is in me, the performance is not, with the result that instead of doing the good things I want to do, I carry out the sinful things I do not want. . . . In fact, this seems to be the rule, that every single time I want to do good it is something evil that comes to hand. (Romans 7:15, 18-19, 21)

Yet Paul is also certain that there is a way out of this predicament. His cry is well known: "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:24-25). Faith in the One Almighty God includes belief that, whatever appearances might suggest, the forces of evil will be overcome. Good will have the final word.

A further dimension of monotheism is naturally a refusal of polytheism where God would have to share his prerogatives with other divinities, and where indeed there could arise a certain rivalry between divinities jealous of their own spheres of influence. Our traditions are full of satirical arguments against such a conception of God. Yet there are other forms of polytheism, or at least of associating something with God, which can insidiously creep into religion. Like the Little Prince, who had to be vigilant lest baobabs should take root on his asteroid and completely take it over, so the one devoted to God has to beware lest the relationship become corrupted. It is necessary to act for God alone and, in seeking to do his will, to be careful not to associate with this worship our own desires and ambitions. Islamic spirituality has developed the idea of this fight against *shirk*, associating something with God, in ways that certainly have a resonance with Christians, and I presume also with Jews in the First Commandment.

Witness

Jews, Christians, and Muslims, we are called to give witness to God in the world. Witness is a key concept in these three traditions and is worth examining more closely.

The Law which God gives to his people, as an expression of his divine will, is inscribed on two tables. When Moses is instructed on how to build the sanctuary, he is told: "Inside the ark you will place the Testimony that I shall give you" (Exodus 25:16). This is understood as a reference to the two tablets on which the Decalogue was written. It is there as a constant reminder to the people of their obligations. Now if the law is not observed, if the people abandon their God, then God will bear witness against his people. The prophet Micah presents God as if he were conducting a trial: "Listen, you peoples, all of you. Attend, earth, and everything in it. The Lord is going to give evidence against you" (Micah 1:2). This witnessing *against* is always, however, in view of conversion and a return to God, for the prophet Ezekiel conveys the word of the Lord: "As I live – it is the Lord who speaks – I take pleasure not in the death of a wicked man, but in the turning back of a wicked man who changes his ways to win life" (Ezekiel 33:11).

In the Christian tradition, the Good News of the Kingdom, preached by Jesus, is destined to be "proclaimed to the whole world as a witness to all the nations" (Matthew 24:14). This is why Jesus sends his disciples to be his witnesses "not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judea and Samaria, and indeed to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

In Islam the profession of faith takes the form of witness, but the witness of human beings is founded on divine witness: "God testifies concerning that which he has revealed to you [Muhammad]; in His knowledge He has revealed it, and the angels also testify. And God is sufficient as a witness" (Qur'an 4:166). Also in Islam this witness has a communal dimension: "Thus We have appointed you a middle nation, that you may be witnesses against mankind, and that the messenger may be a witness against you" (Qur'an 2:143).

This theme could be further developed, but I would like to suggest some ways in which a common witness can be given in the world today. Three points will be touched upon: the primacy of God; the responsibility of human beings; and service to humanity.

The Primacy of God

Are we not called, as believers in God, to that Truth which surpasses us? Is it not our duty to remind this modern society of ours that the human being cannot be its own measure? Human dignity has its source in the creative act of God, whether or not we would wish to go on and affirm that God has created the human person in his own image and likeness. This last-mentioned belief does in fact reinforce the requirement of respect for each human being. It is perhaps good to recall here the teaching of the final section of the Declaration, *Nostra Aetate*:

We cannot truly pray to God, the Father of all, if we treat any people in other than brotherly fashion, for all men are created in God's image. Man's relation to God the Father and man's relation to his fellowmen are so dependent on each other that the Scripture says: "He who does not love, does not know God" (I John 4:8). There is no basis, therefore, for any discrimination between individual and individual, or between people, arising either from human dignity or the rights which flow from it. (*NA*, 5)

To accept the will of the Creator is not to go against the interests of humanity but rather to act to its advantage, for it helps to achieve its destiny.

As believers in God, are we not called to make our voices heard in society in this way? It is surely an obligation on our part to demand respect for the fundamental rights of human beings: the right to life, to physical integrity (which would include opposition to torture and any form of punishment that is incompatible with human dignity), the right to respect for one's reputation, the right to the means necessary for living a decent life, the right to education and of access to cultural development and to objective information, the right to freedom in the search for the truth, freedom of conscience, and religious freedom that includes also the right to profess and practice one's faith not only as an individual but as a member of a community. There is a vast field here for common endeavor. We should remember that to show respect for

our fellow human beings is also to show respect for God.

The Responsibility of Human Beings

To insist on the primacy of God does not mean that the human being is reduced to the status of a pawn on the divine chess board. On the contrary, faith in the Creator God leads to an acceptance of the role that he has entrusted to the human being, namely to be a "co-creator," or, in Islamic terminology, God's *khalifa*, his vicegerent or deputy. We are responsible for the created world and all it contains.

The very existence of evil becomes a challenge to the one whom God has placed in this world to take charge of it. As a result of sin, it is said that the earth will produce brambles and thistles, and that it is only by the sweat of his brow that man will be able to reap its fruits (cf. Genesis 3:18-19). Yet this has not prevented human beings from making progress in agriculture and inventing machinery that can reduce the fatigue of labor. Similarly it is said that the woman will give birth to her children in pain and that her husband will lord it over her (see Genesis 3:16), but this has not put the brakes on advances in gynecology nor on helping couples to live in a relationship of equality and love.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans to which reference has already been made, says:

From the beginning till now the entire creation, as we know, has been groaning in one great act of giving birth; and not only creation, but all of us who possess the first-fruits of the Spirit, we too groan inwardly as we wait for our bodies to be set free. (Romans 8:22-23)

This, as we are well aware, does not imply waiting passively. It is our duty to cooperate with the Spirit of God, to work so that the Kingdom of God may come.

Service to Humanity

From what has just been said about human responsibility, it is an easy step to the idea of service to humanity. Believers in God, we are called to bear witness to our faith in God but also to our faith in the

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human person. Strengthened by our faith in God the Creator, the Provident Master of all, whom we like to call Father, we can bring to the world the hope it needs. We are convinced that evil, that sin, will not be victorious. We believe that God helps us and gives us the strength to continue to strive for the good of our brothers and sisters. It is these convictions of ours that sustain us, in good moments and bad, in times of distress as in times of happiness, in the midst of conflict and when there is peace, at times of failure, apparent or real, and also in times of success.

We feel the need too for common witness in today's world. In October 1999, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue organized an interreligious assembly in order to examine the role of religions in the Third Millennium. In the final message the participants in this assembly declared, ``We are conscious of the urgent need":

To confront together responsibly and courageously the problems and challenges of our modern world.

To work together to affirm human dignity as the source of human rights and their corresponding duties, in the struggle for justice and peace for all.

To create a new spiritual consciousness for all humanity in accordance with the religious traditions so that the principle of respect for freedom of religion and freedom of conscience prevail.¹

They added:

We know that the problems in the world are so great that we cannot solve them alone. Therefore there is an urgent need for interreligious collaboration. We are all aware that interreligious collaboration does not imply giving up our own religious identity but is rather a journey of discovery:

We learn to respect one another as members of the one human family.

We learn both to respect our differences and to appreciate the common values that bind us to one another.

Therefore we are convinced that we are able to work together to strive to prevent conflict and to overcome the crises existing

in different parts of the world. Collaboration among the different religions must be based on the rejection of fanaticism, extremism and mutual antagonisms which lead to violence.²

The next passage in the message underlines the importance of education, something that is of great relevance to this institution, Sacred Heart University, in which we are gathered and which has been a pioneer in this field. There is mention of support for the family, of helping young people to shape their own conscience, of underlining common fundamental moral and spiritual values. There is an appeal to make sure that text books give objective presentations of religious traditions, and attention is called in a similar vein to the use of the mass media to impart objective information.

The message makes several important final appeals:

We appeal to religious leaders to promote the spirit of dialogue within their respective communities and to be ready to engage in dialogue themselves with civil society at all levels.

We appeal to all leaders of the world whatever their field of influence:

To refuse to allow religion to be used to incite hatred and violence.

To refuse to allow religion to be used to justify discrimination.

To respect the role of religion in society at international, national and local levels.³

Much space has been given here to this message because it is possible, probable even, that it is not widely known. Moreover, it is evident that it has not lost any of its relevance for today's world.

In the Service of Peace

The statement above underlines the need for the cooperation of people of different religions in the service of peace. It is in fact often said that there will be no peace in the world until there is peace among the religions. A finger is pointed to religions as being at the origin of conflicts. It could be questioned whether this is wholly true. Of course, it must be admitted that religion has, in the course of history, produced

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conflicts, and can do so today. But such conflicts may have a multiplicity of causes, and so it is only fair to distinguish between those which are strictly speaking religious, taking their origin from differences of belief, and those which are based on non-religious motivations but take on a religious coloring.

Tensions and disputes can arise within a given religious tradition because of different ways of envisaging the faith or of understanding it. One could cite the christological disputes of the first centuries of Christianity, in which the imperial power became involved. Even today, within the various Christian confessions, there arise serious causes of division, though these do not usually end up in armed combat. Islam too has known in its history grave dissensions which have given rise to assassinations and conflict.

The ways of overcoming these conflicts may be different. In Christianity, councils were convoked in order to determine correct belief and to condemn heresies (punishment for heretics often being entrusted to the secular arm). Special courts were set up, such as the Inquisition, or the *Mihna* in Islam, again to distinguish between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, and to punish those who had strayed. Even though today we would not approve of these methods, it should be recognized that the aim in all this was to keep the integrity of the respective faith and to protect society.

Very often, however, conflicts which appear to be religious are caused by non-religious factors. These may be socio-economic causes, such as in Northern Ireland, where the social difference between Catholics and Protestants and lack of equal opportunities has consolidated the opposition between the two groups. Something similar could be said about the recent clashes in Indonesia, in Ambon, and Kalimantan, where migration has brought different groups which happen to be Islamic on the one hand and Christian on the other to oppose one another. Ethnic and cultural factors also come into play, as in the struggle between Tamils and Cingalese in Sri Lanka, or Hindus and Muslims in Kashmir. And how should one categorize the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians?

Whether the causes are religious or not, the followers of different religions feel the duty to contribute to overcoming these conflicts and to work for peace. They are conscious that peace is a gift from God which has to be implored, but which also has, in a sense, to be earned.

It is this conviction that has led Pope John Paul II to invite representatives of different religions to Assisi, Italy, to pray for peace. He did this in October 1986, and more recently on January 24, 2002. Let me quote some of the words John Paul II used on that occasion:

If peace is God's gift and has its source in him, where are we to seek it and how can we build it, if not in a deep and intimate relationship with God? To build the peace of order, justice, and freedom requires, therefore, a priority commitment to prayer, which is openness, listening, dialogue, and finally union with God, the prime wellspring of true peace.

To pray is not to escape from history and the problems which it presents. On the contrary, it is to choose to face reality not on our own, but with the strength that comes from on high, the strength of truth and love which have their ultimate source in God. Faced with the treachery of evil, religious people can count on God, who absolutely wills what is good. They can pray to him to have the courage to face even the greatest difficulties with a sense of personal responsibility, never yielding to fatalism or impulsive reactions.⁴

The representatives gathered in Assisi on that day – including Rabbi Joseph Ehrenkranz and Dr. David Coppola, representing the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding of Sacred Heart University – made a solemn tenfold commitment to peace, each commitment being read out in a different language. Let me quote some of these which emphasize the need for dialogue among the religions:

We commit ourselves to proclaiming our firm conviction that violence and terrorism are incompatible with the authentic spirit of religion, and, as we condemn every recourse to violence and war in the name of God or of religion, we commit ourselves to doing everything possible to eliminate the root causes of terrorism.

We commit ourselves to educating people to mutual respect and esteem, in order to help bring about a peaceful and fraternal coexistence between people of different ethnic groups,

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cultures, and religions.

We commit ourselves to fostering the culture of dialogue, so that there will be an increase of understanding and mutual trust between individuals and among people, for these are the premise of authentic peace.

We commit ourselves to frank and patient dialogue, refusing to consider our differences as an insurmountable barrier, but recognizing instead that to encounter the diversity of others can become an opportunity for greater reciprocal understanding.

The Conditions for a True Dialogue

Dialogue is never easy. It is important to recognize that there are certain conditions required for it to be successful. The first of these is an open mind and a welcoming spirit. This means that two extremes are to be avoided: on the one hand, a certain ingenuity, which accepts everything without further questioning; and on the other hand, a hypercritical attitude, which leads to suspicion. Impartiality is required. What is being sought is an equitable solution to the particular problem that is to be resolved.

Being open-minded does not imply being without personal convictions. On the contrary, rootedness in one's own convictions will allow for greater openness, for it takes away the fear of losing one's identity. It thus facilitates the understanding of the other's convictions. Such an openness leads to the admission that the whole of the truth is not just on one side. There is always a need to learn from others, to receive from them, to benefit from their values and everything that is good in their traditions. Dialogue in this spirit helps to overcome prejudices and to revise stereotypes.

Returning to the concept of monotheism, it would seem to me that we are helped in this particular aspect of dialogue by our belief in a God who is Truth. God alone is to be identified with absolute Truth. We ourselves cannot pretend to attain this level. Without falling into relativism, we can readily admit that our view of things does not really attain to ultimate Truth. For this reason in dialogue it is necessary not

only to speak but also to listen to the other in order to receive the other's part of truth.

The Pillars of Peace

Truth is the first pillar of peace, according to the teaching of Pope John XXIII in his letter *Pacem in Terris*, which he wrote forty years ago. John Paul II has recalled this anniversary in his message for the Day of Peace this year, and has brought to mind the four essential requirements for peace identified by John XXIII: truth, justice, love, and freedom. Truth brings each individual to acknowledge his or her own rights, but also to recognize his or her own duties towards others. Justice leads people to respect the rights of others and also to fulfil their duties. Love goes beyond justice, for it makes people feel the needs of others as if they were their own, and this empathy leads them to share their own gifts with others, not only material goods but also the values of mind and spirit. Freedom, finally, is a factor in building peace when it allows people to act according to reason and to assume responsibility for their own actions.

John Paul II, in his message for the previous year, 2002, had himself spoken of two pillars of peace, justice and forgiveness, which is a particular form of love. Human justice is always imperfect and needs to be complemented by forgiveness. It is this which allows broken relationships to be restored. It allows confidence to be regained and a new departure to take place. This holds good not only for individuals, but also for social groups, even states. It is the capacity to forgive that can create the conditions necessary to overcome the sterility of reciprocal condemnations and the spiral of increasing violence.

This teaching of the Pope is resolutely Christian, for Jesus taught that God is a Father who loves to pardon (see Luke 15). Yet surely this conforms to the image of God given in the First Testament. The Psalmist invites his soul to bless the Lord and to remember his kindnesses, "in forgiving all your offenses," for he is "tender and compassionate, slow to anger, most loving" (Psalms 103:3, 8). The book of Nehemiah addresses God in a similar way: "But you are a God of forgiveness, gracious and loving, slow to anger, abounding in goodness" (Nehemiah 9:17). Does not the Qur'an echo this? God is constantly proclaimed *al-rahmân al-rahîm*, the Beneficent, the

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Merciful. He is also *al-ghafûr*; the one whose very inclination is to pardon. According to Islamic spirituality believers are to "clothe" themselves with the attributes of God, so surely there is an encouragement to forgive as God is forgiving.

Let me conclude then on this note. The monotheistic religions, in particular the Abrahamic religions, have much to contribute to peace. They will do so by upholding the dignity of human beings, by pursuing justice, but also by practicing and appealing for the spirit of pardon. John Paul II concludes this year's peace message with these words:

The fortieth anniversary of *Pacem in Terris* is an apt occasion to return to Pope John XXIII's prophetic teaching. Catholic communities will know how to celebrate this anniversary during the year with initiatives which, I hope, will have an ecumenical and interreligious character and be open to all those who have a heartfelt desire "to break through the barriers which divide them, to strengthen the bonds of mutual love, to learn to understand one another and to pardon those who have done them wrong."

The conference "Pathways to Peace in the Abrahamic Faiths," organized by the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding of Sacred Heart University, certainly fulfills this wish, and I am happy and privileged to have been able to share these thoughts with you on the eve of its commencement.

Notes

¹Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Towards a Culture of Dialogue* (Vatican City, 2000), p. 79.

²*Towards a Culture of Dialogue*, pp. 79-80.

³*Towards a Culture of Dialogue*, p. 80.

⁴Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Peace: a Single Goal and a Shared Intention* (Vatican City, 2002), p. 91.