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RELIGION AND VIOLENCE, RELIGION AND PEACE

Essays from the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding Conference in Auschwitz, Poland May 1998

Edited by Joseph H. Ehrenkranz and David L. Coppola

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PREFACE

For the first time in two millennia, Jews and Christians have the opportunity to put aside their divisiveness and seek reconciliation and understanding. The Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding (CCJU) advocates a respect for the dignity of all people and celebrates the special relationship between Jews and Christians. As an academic and research division of Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, Connecticut, and founded upon the principles outlined in the 1965 Vatican II document, Nostra Aetate, the CCJU promotes forums for dialogue and study in order to advance greater knowledge, understanding, and harmony between religions. The Center is committed to advancing and publishing the insights of religious leaders, scholars, and educators as they contribute to the disciplines of theology, philosophy, history, ethics, aesthetics, and pedagogy. This book is an invaluable resource for students of theology, as well as religious leaders and other adults involved in religious education. Most of all, it is written for those who are unafraid to imagine a world without violence.

On May 18, 1998, scholars, rabbis, priests, bishops, Islamic leaders, cardinals, members of the press, and observers from twelve countries gathered to discuss the role that religion plays in cultivating peace or promoting violence. I invited these people of good will to gather for a three-day conference on "Religion and Violence, Religion and Peace." We met at the Center for Dialogue and Prayer, a short walk from the main gates of the infamous Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp, where an estimated 1.5 million people, mostly Jews, were killed amidst the horror of the Nazi regime during World War II.

Not surprisingly, some participants expressed their uneasiness about my choice of the site for the conference. Peace is probably close to the last thing that thoughts of the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz evokes. I chose Auschwitz because it is a symbol
of the international cemetery which the world will be reduced to if we do not find some way to live in peace with one another. My aim in this coming together of continents was to see how we could cooperate in eliminating the violent direction so much religious teaching takes. I wanted to establish that violence in the name of God cannot be justified.

Among the many people who responded to my invitation were Mr. Sefko Omerbasic, president of the Meshihat of the Islamic Community of Croatia; Bishop John Brown, Episcopal bishop emeritus from Cyprus; Archbishop Jeremiasz of the Macedonian Orthodox Church; Father Remi E. Hoekman, secretary of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews; Cahal Cardinal Daly, the retired Catholic Primate of All Ireland; Franciszek Cardinal Macharski, the Archbishop of Krakow, Poland; and William Cardinal Keeler, the Archbishop of Baltimore, who chairs the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Catholic-Jewish Relations.

Of special importance to the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding was the participation by five Orthodox rabbis. They were from Jerusalem, the West Bank Settlement of Efrat, Paris, New York and Connecticut. Orthodox rabbis have considered interfaith discussion of religious doctrine to be forbidden, due to practices in the Middle Ages when "disputations" between rabbis and priests frequently resulted in a beaten or dead rabbi. In 1964, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the revered Orthodox leader of Boston and my teacher, reiterated the interdiction in an article entitled "Confrontation," in which he discouraged any theological discussions between Jews and Christians as long as Christians treated Jews as either objects of conversion or somehow as inferior. I believe that my former teacher would agree with me that the time is right for honest and equal dialogue to begin.

The CCJU conference at Auschwitz represents the first time that I am aware of where a prominent group of Orthodox rabbis participated in an interfaith discussion of a theological nature. I knew I was on the right track when this historic event received strong support from the Vatican. Edward Idris Cardinal Cassidy, president of the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, wrote to me and said, "His Holiness Pope John
Paul II expresses strong encouragement for your endeavors and a sincere wish that your work may contribute to bringing about lasting peace for the whole human family."

The Catholic Church has been actively working for decades to enter into a theological dialogue with the full range of Judaism. The Vatican II document Nostra Aetate called for the revision of all texts and teaching to remove all anti-Jewish bias and repudiated any teachings that held that the Jews killed Jesus. This was followed by numerous papal statements on anti-Semitism, the ongoing validity of Judaism (no longer "superseded" by Christianity), the Shoah, and the Vatican's recognition of the State of Israel, which have all led up to this historic opportunity. From a Jewish viewpoint, it is hardly believable that the Catholic Church is still accused of indifference to Jewish concerns. More has been achieved in the last 30 years than in the previous 2000. We are living in exceptional times.

I agree with Dr. Anthony J. Cernera, President of Sacred Heart University, who began the conference by saying, "We have come together because we believe that our respective religious traditions can contribute to creating a world where there is greater justice and peace. . . . This conference provides us with the opportunity to search together for meaning and to enter into honest and humble reflection together, in the hope that we can—because we will work together—take a small step in the direction of fostering peace and overcoming violence."

The conference was a respectful, balanced, and cautious dialogue discussing peace and violence in religion. Those who attended heard papers on the roots of peace in the Torah, the New Testament, and the Qur'an. Speakers warned that religions still have the potential to incite wars and, as such, have a grave responsibility to foster a spirituality committed to preserving life and cultures of justice.

My good friend, Dr. Samuel Pisar, an international attorney from Paris and New York and a survivor of Auschwitz, described the violence that he, his family, and friends experienced. In his moving address entitled "Blood and Hope," he said, "On these killing fields, we dare not forget that the past can also be prologue. . . . Fundamentalism, fanaticism, all ideologies that despise the
human being can push our societies toward a new delirium of violence."

The subject of fundamentalism and fanaticism in religion surfaced several times in the course of the conference. The most systematic presentation on the roots and causes of fundamentalism came from Dr. Martin Many, Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago. This world-renowned scholar and expert on religion and society discussed fundamentalism and how it can be a precursor to violence. The Muslim speakers at the conference stressed that the Qur'an outlaws violence and that the contemporary examples of violence committed in the name of religious jihad bore "no relation whatever" to authentic Islam.

In late afternoon of the second day, participants were invited to visit the Auschwitz-Birkenau Nazi death camp. This is, in the words of Dr. Pisar, "a cursed and sacred place," "the modern Golgotha." Standing on the site of a destroyed crematorium, the only possible response by the participants was prayer, sung and spoken in Hebrew, Arabic, English, and Spanish. All were drawn into the fundamental truth: we are all God's creation, all life is sacred. The next day, with the images of the death camp still fresh in our minds, many of us concurred that it had been impossible to sleep because the wailing sounds of the trains by the hotel echoed like the Kaddish, the Jewish prayers for the dead.

One does not expect monumental accomplishments at a three-day conference. However, it was clear that new friendships had been formed and trust had been strengthened through honest dialogue. His Eminence, Jeremiasz, Orthodox Archbishop of Wroclaw and Szczecin, Poland, said that this was the first time he had been at a meeting like this where people of different faiths could share ideas and break bread in peace. Cahal Cardinal Daly called the conference "an important step toward better interfaith relations. The Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding has come of age with this conference. It has extended its outreach into the various religious communities and become more convinced of the need to pursue its contacts with ever greater courage."

Rabbi David Rosen, executive director of the Anti-Defamation League in Israel, said in his closing remarks, "We therefore have to devote ourselves with renewed energy and vigor, because our
work in gatherings like this is a testimony of what is possible. They are a sanctification of God's name. They are a testimony of divine presence in the world and of divine purpose in the world."

The Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding has now gathered the proceedings of the conference held in Auschwitz into this book, including two supplemental papers by Dr. David L. Coppola, director of conferences and publications for the CCJU, and Father Georges Cottier, O.P., Pope John Paul II's personal theologian. Dr. Coppola attended the conference, and his paper frames the issues and problems surrounding religion, peace, and violence, while Father Cottier's essay concludes the book by looking ahead to a future filled with scholarly cooperation and charitable dialogue between religions.

The conference did not end when we all left Auschwitz. On the contrary, the shared ideas and strengthened trust experienced at the conference continues in our friendships and through this book, which I hope will be read by many people in the pew. There is a fundamental link between religion and peace, and I believe that all genuine religious leaders are trying to bring their people toward a peaceful understanding of their faith. Religion must be the driving force that brings about peaceful existence on this planet. Political powers are often able to manipulate religious leaders to promote violence. By bringing together religious leaders of all three Abrahamic faiths, we now know that whether it is the Torah, the New Testament, or the Qur'an, all commandments evolving from these holy books point to the value of human life. As my friend, Rabbi Rene-Samuel Sirat, Chief Rabbi Emeritus of Europe, said so well: "There is no such thing as a holy war in Christianity, nor in Islam, nor in Judaism. Only peace is holy, for peace is the name of God."

A special word of thanks is due to my wife, Sandra, for her involvement in the daily preparation of special foods at the conference; Father Poitr Wrona, director of the Center for Prayer and Dialogue; Edward Piszek for his enthusiasm and support for this project and through whose office many of the details and arrangements in Poland were expedited; David L. Coppola, director of conferences and publications at the CCJU, for shaping
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