



Abrahamic Faiths called to cooperate for peace

Lisa Palmieri-Billig* | 01.02.2020

24 Christian, Jewish, Muslim leaders gather in Rome.

Samuel Brownback, U.S. Ambassador for Religious Freedom, is convinced that only by combining forces will political, diplomatic, and religious leaders be able to effect change leading to peace in the many conflicts ranging in the world today. "If diplomats had consulted with religious leaders 40 years ago, many wars could have been avoided", the Ambassador declared in a passionate speech at the reception hosted by U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See Callista Gingrich, that inaugurated 3 days of consultations in Rome by 24 leaders of the three Abrahamic faiths.

The "Abrahamic Faiths Initiative" was sponsored and organized by the U.S. State Dep't. with three delegations of eight top leaders each representing the Muslim, Jewish and Christian faiths. Heads of these international teams are respectively: Imam Mohamed Hag Magid, a U.S. citizen born in Sudan who heads the Islamic Society of North America - the largest Muslim association in the U.S.; Rabbi David Saperstein, President of the World Union of Progressive Judaism; and the Evangelical leader, Pastor Bob Roberts.

Ambassador Brownback noted that when leaders of different beliefs stand together on divisive issues their unity serves to tone down conflicts. Referring to a past personal experience in an analogous political context, he recalled the ovation when he -- a political conservative - appeared on the same platform as Democrat Ted Kennedy with both declaring agreement on an issue that could otherwise have triggered contentious division. He feels certain that "if religious leaders representing the parts at war in diverse areas of the world would travel together and make joint statements at these hotspots, they could truly help bring about peace."

A warm atmosphere reigned at an intimate, private meeting of the group with Pope Francis at Santa Marta evidencing the Holy Father's support of these statements. Reportedly, Francis replied to questions put by Pastor Roberts on behalf of participants by confirming that the essential challenge was to express and convey sentiments of human empathy and a spirit of collaboration. He agreed that a valuable contribution could be that of Christians, Jews and Muslims working together on projects of social concern.

The group plans a future program with 3 focal points: 1) creating united Abrahamic faith teams of Jewish, Christian and Muslim organizations to work jointly on the ground regarding urgent and complex issues such as those concerning refugees and poverty; 2) strongly symbolic gestures as, for example, sending interreligious delegations to places of historic religious significance (Ur in Iraq -- Abraham's birthplace, or perhaps Mt. Nebo where Moses received the Ten Commandments) and 3) intervening as teams whenever and wherever religion is misused as an excuse for violence.

The 24 significant participating religious leaders included - to mention but a few - the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilus; the Archbishop of Armenia; Prof. Ingrid Matson - the past president of the Islamic Society of North America; the Mauritanian Sheikh Abdallah Bin Bayyah; Sheikh Yahya Staquf, head of the Indonesian Madhalutal Ulama ("Humanitarian Islam") movement with its 60 million membership - the largest Muslim organization in the world - which aims to restore the ideal of "Ramah" (universal love) and had sent a sizable delegation to visit Israel in June, 2018; Cardinal Ayuso Guizot and Msgr. Khaled Akasheh of the Vatican's Council for Interreligious Dialogue; Fr. Norbert Hofmann of the Vatican's Committee for Religious Relations with Jews; and from Jerusalem, Rabbi David Rosen - AJC's Director for International Interreligious Affairs.

Rabbi Rosen commented that “It was wonderful to be together with like-minded people of different religions seeking to make the world a better place.” He also declared he found remarkable the plans for collaboration between diplomatic, political and religious leaders to engage religion in service of humankind. “Neither the secular nor the religious world can deliver independently”, he said.

He recalled that on January 23 and 24 an unprecedented interreligious delegation sponsored by AJC will visit Auschwitz to mark the 75th anniversary of its liberation. For the very first time ten distinguished Muslim leaders from Arab countries, led by the Secretary General of the World Muslim League Mohammed al Issa, will make this trip, They will be accompanied by a high level delegation from the American Jewish Committee.

A final Statement was promoted unanimously at the end of the Abrahamic Faiths retreat . It is based on “the principles stated in the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations. The stated commitment is to “ ‘resolutely declare that religions must never incite war, hateful attitudes, hostility and extremism, nor must they incite violence or the shedding of blood,’ as stated in the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together in 2019” - a joint statement signed by Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar in Abu Dhabi. In addition, the statement makes a significant reference to the 2016 Marrakesh Declaration on the Rights of Minorities in Muslim-Majority Countries “and its affirmation of the principle of constitutional citizenship, which ensures that members of all faiths, as well as those without, enjoy justice and equality under the law, including their religious freedom.” Recalling that societies must respect the rights of non-believers as well as those of believers seems an important addition considering the persecutions that often occur against agnostics, atheists and those who change their religions in Islamic countries. This provision was not mentioned in the Abu Dhabi document.

The Statement emphasizes that “too few of these eloquent statements and long-held beliefs have been implemented to transform societies” and pledges a series of joint actions to convert words into facts.

Editorial remarks

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