

A prayer for peace

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EN ROUTE

As this year's Ramazan is coming to an end and Eid ul Fitr will be celebrated by Muslims, along with members of other religions living in their midst, we all pray for peace. We pray for peace in our hearts, the right relationship with God and with fellow human beings.

Let my article today be a prayer for peace, an attempt to contribute to a world where we all, irrespective of faith, can live better with fellow believers in own religion and in community with others. My prayer for peace goes beyond the main religions in Pakistan, and the other religions – even beyond all religions, suggesting that the basis for morality and ethics, indeed for peace, is not only to be found in a religions, although it may help, but is found in the broader human experience – as God is in each of us.

This year, in a world where terrible wars are raging at this very moment, our thoughts and actions – and our prayers – become more important than ever.

Two young friends, Afzehl and Tariq, whom I talk with often at their places of work, one in a restaurant and the other in a photocopy shop, have urged me to write about the Israel-Palestine conflict. They find the conflict entirely senseless, perhaps even keeping them awake at night worried about the extent of human evil. The main victims are Muslims, but the suffering goes beyond that, it is a human tragedy also for the Jews, and others, even those who may not really be believers. When there is oppression, conflict and lack of equality, it is not only the oppressed that suffer, but also the oppressor.

I cannot answer Afzehl's and Tariq's questions and worries. I don't know how to find a solution to the more the six decade old conflict. But I can talk about it, think about it, learn more about it, worry together with my young friends, and encourage them to stay engaged. It is people like Afzehl and Tariq who eventually will solve the Israel-Palestine conflict, and all the other conflicts and misunderstandings that are elsewhere and in our backyard, now also in North-Waziristan, where a million people have become displaced. Couldn't better ways have been found to reach peaceful and lasting solutions?

In Syria, hundreds of people are killed and injured every day and more than a third of the country's population has become refugees. It was a similar percentage of Afghans that became refugees and IDPs when the wars raged there. And Iraq is also close to civil war. Life can never be brought back to what it was; it cannot be rebuilt. Only future generations can do that, well, they can build a new life and future.

There are many other violent conflicts and wars, even in Europe, where the West's propaganda wars exaggerate the conflicts. And there are structural wars and ruthless oppression of poor people, while the rich cruise comfortably at the top. Those are struggles we barely see, or want to see; they are not as sudden and direct, but they are cruel and they deprive people forever of what are also their rights. The leaders of our world's economic and political system don't want us to see this as war. Sometimes, leaders use religion to fuel conflicts, too, which is particularly sad.

Frederik Willem de Klerk, the South African president who released Nelson Mandela from his 27 years imprisonment, paving the way for democratic rule, said that he believed that there was no conflict that could not be resolved by meaningful negotiations, if there was a will on both side to do so. They were wise words from a wise man. Maybe he came late to his conclusion in the tragic history of South Africa's apartheid, a system with many parallels to Israel's occupation and blockade of Gaza and the handling of the Palestinians at large. But de Clark

did find the right answers. I pray we all see the reality as it is, and find the truth in all tragic conflicts, and do what is right.

Since time immemorial, people have been concerned about *good and evil* as philosophical, religious moral and ethical issues; today, we also add, social and economic issues. One commonly cited verse in the Bible, Romans 7:19, reads: ‘I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do, this I keep doing.’ And another verse, Peter 3:9: “Do not repay evil with evil, or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.”

Christians and Muslims pray for peace, and see both religions as religions of peace.

Yet, we also know that religions historically, and also in our time, are used to divide and split people; we do what is wrong, not what is right, in spite of the teachings by God’s messengers contained in the holy books. And when religions are misused, we may even let it pass because it may give power to ‘our side’. Or, we excuse the wrong casually by saying it is not the faith that is wrong; it is people who do wrong. Let us pray that religious leaders and all faithful understand the teachings in the right way, and interpret them into our time.

Some philosophers, who may also be faithful in their one religion, may advocate moral principles and ethics, which are universal and tolerant to others, thus ensuring the survival and well-being of all human beings everywhere at any time. Those of us who belong to one of the large religions, may easily say that our religion is right and best, and that our principles are best, because they are given by God. We will advocate that others should follow our rules and standards. That is not right; all religions are ‘minority religions’.

It is my hope that the debates within and between religions could distinguish between dogma and doctrine, on the one hand, and the practical and administrative ways that it is recommended that we organize our daily lives, on the other hand. Ecumenical cooperation should not be about dogma and doctrines, as they differ and are sacred to the specific religion. The interfaith cooperation should be about how we live together in this world, and how we let the foundations of faith in the broad sense guide our lives, the moral and ethical standards that we follow, which all human beings know are right – because God is in each of us.

Dear read, this would be my prayer for peace at the end of Ramazan this year, and the whole year. May I wish you *Eid Mubarak* – peace with God and fellow human beings.

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from university, diplomacy and development aid.
