

## **God will enable us to stand**

The Christian faith has the potential, at least, to bring peace to the world. And it has that potential for a variety of reasons. One of those reasons is that it relativizes—it makes less important—some things which people might claim as almost replacing God in importance, or in significance. The Christian faith has the potential to bring peace, also, because, thanks to Jesus' death on the cross, death is no longer ruler of the world; there is no longer, as the apostle Paul refers to it, “the sting of death”. Rather, Jesus, in his death on the cross, frees us from fear, to confidence in God and peace. And, thirdly, the Christian faith has the potential to bring peace to the world, because God, in Christ, wishes to bring people into unity with one another as his children, giving them of his Spirit, so that we may live in peace as his children. So, the Christian faith has the potential, then, of bringing peace to the world.

Now, ten years ago, today, a little bit earlier in the day, events began to unfold in the United States—the crashing of planes into the World Trade Center, and also into the Pentagon, in Washington, DC; following that, a crash of a plane in a field in Pennsylvania. Those were events which are etched in the memory of all of us, I am sure. And we likely can remember the circumstances even of that day. For example, the person who informed me of what was going on was our daughter, Jessica, who phoned to say that, earlier that morning, Michael Templeton had given her a pre-engagement ring. But then she went on to indicate what had taken place in New York, in particular.

For many of us, that was one of our first experiences, up-close and personal, with people who claimed to be Muslim. And, of course, I mention this with some hesitation. But, over the last ten years, I have made some effort in understanding that other religion, one billion strong in this world—namely, Islam; and I have done so, particularly, through the eyes of a Catholic theologian, Hans Kung, who has written a trilogy of books on Judaism, Christianity and Islam. And, finally, this summer, I was able to complete that book on Islam.

All religions need to be self-critical—even Christianity, of course. And, of course, one of the responses of the followers of Islam was that these people who were responsible for that devastation, that loss of life, were not representing Islam. And, of course, according to what Islam claims, one could say, “No, that is not the case; they did not represent Islam.” They certainly did not represent the one billion Muslims in the world, who espouse quite a different ethic.

However, just as when the Irish were busy murdering one another, or as when we look at our own history, in Christianity, and recognize the great harm that has been done in the name of Christ, in various parts of the world, including the Crusades—just like Christianity, Islam, perhaps, needs to be critical of itself. So if, for example, if this did not represent Islam, where did these people get the notion that they were somehow representing God who is great, Allah Akbar.

And one of the things that Hans Küng suggests is that, just like Christianity has, over the past couple of centuries, taken a critical approach to its own scriptures, so that we have an historical criticism of Scriptures, literary criticism, and the like—so Islam needs to be able to take a critical look at its own religious scriptures, namely, the Koran, in particular.

Now, the Koran, as Muslims claim, is simply dictated by God to Muhammed. However, wouldn't it be of some value—not only for people outside of Islam, but also for Muslims as well—to take a good look at the Koran, and see just where it comes from, what the human

dimensions are of that writing. Just as, What are the human dimensions associated with the book we claim as our Holy Scriptures, the Old and New Testaments.

I remember a few years ago reading a book by John Bennett, who did a critique of communism. Now communism is not Islam. But his critique of communism was that it had a very optimistic view of human nature, at least in theory. According to the theory of communism, there should be equal distribution of all the wealth to all people. Now, the actual fact of communism was, of course, very different, as you can see in the whole period of history, stretching from Lenin through Stalin and beyond.

Islam means “submission”; and, actually, that word, “islam”, is based on the root *salaam*, which is “peace”, as, in Hebrew, *shalom*. But one wonders, or, at least, I wonder whether Islam is perhaps not being critical enough of itself, as we also ought to do with our own selves, concerning human nature, and what it is capable of, and how that religion deals with human nature. Islam calls for “submission”; true, but what about all these human tendencies, which we share, with all other persons of the world. What about those human tendencies to violence? Is there something within that faith which truly addresses that issue? Or, like communism, is there an excessively optimistic view of human nature in that religion?

Now, I am perhaps speaking out of turn, in that respect. But, the Christian faith, by contrast, understands that human sin is a fundamental problem. And, of course, human sin continues whether one is Christian or not Christian. But it is our faith that, in Christ, sin, that violence, has at least a beginning remedy, ultimately *the* remedy in the death of Jesus on the cross, whereby we are reconciled to God, and where fear and violence are not the dominant realities in our lives. Does Islam have something comparable, that it addresses this characteristic of human beings, our violent natures?

Now, one could also mention that Islam calls for unity among the peoples of the world. And, in fact, there seems to be a great solidarity among Muslims in the world. They do stick together, although there are these groups that are violently opposed to one another, the Sunnis and the Shiites, among others.

So, Muslims claim that what took place on September 11, 2001, had nothing to do with Islam. Now what followed—does it have anything to do with Christianity, such as involvement in the war in Iraq, and so on? We could ask ourselves those questions. It is important to be self-critical.

And the apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans, is critical, because he notes that “sin” or, shall we say, “conflict”, arises right within the Christian community. We are not immune, we, in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, are not immune, from the conflicts which are part of human life, but which faith in Christ does address.

And so he asks the question, “Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another?” He talks about some passing judgement, and others despising certain individuals. I’ll just recap briefly. In that Christian community in Rome, there were people of Jewish-Christian, who, of course, observed special Jewish days; they remained Jews, although they were Christians; they were Jewish-Christians. They observed special days; they also observed the dietary restrictions involved in Judaism. And then there were these non-Jewish converts to Christianity who had none of this “baggage”, they would say. They were able to observe any day just like the last, and they were able to eat no matter what, because all had been given by God. Those people who felt

free to do whatever felt, maybe, “enlightened”, and could look down on these other people who were caught up still in their Jewish practices of observing special days, kosher requirements, and so on.

Paul indicates, in the expanse of the letter as a whole, that all these things have become “relativized”; all these things have become less important, than faith in God as revealed in Christ, who has made atonement for our sins. And so, he describes at length how the “law” is now, really, dethroned, in a way. It is certainly a vehicle whereby we may express our faith in God. But it’s not a reality separate from God, which determines our behaviour separate from faith, and, on the basis of which, we could be self-righteous, and condemn others.

On the other hand, our own “knowledge”, our own “philosophy”, that we might inherit—that also is “relativized”, made less important, thanks to faith in Christ, so that we no longer look down on these poor souls who still observe the Sabbath, and kosher dietary restrictions, and the like.

I don’t know if you hear any echoes in our own Christian community. But the Christian community today continues to be divided. But this passage, and the whole letter of Paul to the Romans, is a challenge to us to make less important our “knowledge” (Paul says that “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up”). And sometimes, the Bible itself can become a replacement for God; and that is perhaps the case in Islam with its Koran. But, as the Christian faith has indicated, over the centuries, ultimately, we are not a “people of the book”. We have a central Scripture. But, ultimately, we are people of faith in Christ; and that faith in Christ makes somewhat less important this testimony of Scripture, which is an “essential” testimony (I would say) to that faith.

So there is in our Christian faith a basis for eliminating or making less prominent the conflicts which are even part of our Christian community, our own congregation, or between Christian communities.

As I mentioned, in the Christian faith, we have belief that God, in Christ, was reconciling the world to himself, that Jesus’ death means that fear is not the ultimate determining factor in our lives. Rather, we are reconciled to God, we have peace with God, and, therefore, we practice non-violence towards others. We seek to be reconciled with our neighbour, live at peace with our neighbour. That pointed emphasis of the Christian faith is fundamental to our living out our lives which are peaceful and bringing peace, reconciliation to others.

I have also mentioned that, in the Christian faith, there is this intent of God, in Christ, to bring us all into the one family of faith, the one family of God, the kingdom of God, where all are sisters and brothers, where we share the one Spirit, and call on God as Father. So that also is a strong basis for peace in our own midst, between our Christian communities, and in the world.

So the Christian faith ought to be a source of great peace-making in the world, and oftentimes it has. It is up to us to be those people who, on the basis of what God has done for us in Christ, hold up what is truly important, namely our faith in God as revealed in Christ, live out of the reconciliation which he has achieved through Jesus’ death on the cross for our sake, and also live in terms of the vision, the will that God has for us, to be unified as all God’s children, calling God, our Father, who is in heaven.