Religion combatting extremism and promoting peace

By Rabbi David Rosen, KSC CBE

Saint John Paul II declared that "religion is the chief antidote to violence and conflict" (*Message for the 2002 World Day of Peace*, 14.). Most people of religious faith would surely share this view. All the world religions declare that their goal is peace, harmony and the wellbeing of human society. Yet we cannot ignore the fact that not only has terrible violence been perpetrated in the name of religion; but that there are not a few adherents of religions in different parts of the world today who actually believe that conflict and violence against others is precisely what their religion demands.

Accordingly, when addressing the question of how to tackle the violent abuse of religion, the question that must be addressed is precisely why Religions all too often do *not* play the role they should, especially in contexts of conflict in our world. Why do religious attachments seem so frequently to exacerbate conflicts, rather than help resolve them and promote the peace and reconciliation that ostensibly is their métier?

Religion has been described by notable social scientists in terms of three "B"s – Belief, Behavior and Belonging; and different religions may constitute different combinations or emphases of these.

The abuse of religion has often been related to the first two of these. It cannot be denied that arguments over doctrine and even ritual, have led to violent clashes, and even today are used as a pretext for violence towards those who do not share the same beliefs and practices.

However, violence in the name of religion especially in our modern world, usually has far more to do with "belonging" and reflects the socio-cultural, territorial, and political contexts in which religion functions.

Because religion seeks to give meaning and purpose to who we are, it is inextricably bound up with all the different components of human identity, from the most basic such as family, through the larger components of communities, ethnic groups, nations and peoples, to the widest components of humanity and creation as a whole. These components of human identity are the building blocks of our psycho- spiritual wellbeing and we deny them at our peril. (Scholars studying the modern human condition have pointed out just how much the counterculture, drug abuse, violence, cults etc. are a search for identity on the part of the disorientated who have lost traditional compasses of orientation.)

These components of our identity affirm who we are; but by definition at the same time they affirm who we are not! Whether the perception of distinction and difference is viewed positively or negatively, depends overwhelmingly upon the context in which we find ourselves or perceive ourselves to be.

In contexts of conflict, identity tends to be not just a nurturing of positive affiliation, but also a vehicle for self-righteousness and disparagement of "the other".

The image I find useful in explaining the behavior of particular identities for good or bad, is that of a spiral. These different components of identity are like circles within circles. When they feel secure within the wider context in which they find themselves, then they can affirm, open up and contribute to the broader context; families engaging other families; communities working together with other communities; nations contributing to the commonweal of nations; and religions affirming all human dignity within the family of humankind.

However, when these components of human identity do not feel comfortable in the broader context, they cut themselves off from the wider context, isolate themselves and invariably denigrate the other/s, compounding the sense of alienation.

Because Religion is bound up with identity, it plays a key role in nurturing identity when threatened (or perceived as such) providing support and succor in contexts of conflict. However all too often in giving people a sense of value and purpose especially when they feel vulnerable and insecure, religions often tend to become part and parcel of that aforementioned self-righteousness that delegitimizes the other, exacerbating conflict and alienation, betraying religions' most sublime universal values.

Of course, the threat of violence demands that necessary steps for self-defense are taken; and many if not most would argue that sometimes there is no moral recourse in the short term but to paradoxically use violence to stem violence. Nevertheless, all our religions teach that this is not good enough. Ancient Jewish wisdom declares (*Ethics of Rabbi Nathan*, 23) "who is a true hero, he who makes his enemy into a friend".

Combatting violent extremism demands maximal efforts to drain the swamps of alienation in which the anopheles of conflict breeds - economic and political marginalization and so on. However as indicated, there is more to the source of alienation that threatens societies today than such material and political factors. The psychology of rejection is arguably the most potent of all the sources of alienation, and it is not possible to begin to understand the hostility that exists among certain extremist militant violent groups that find their succor and inspiration in religion, if one ignores the power of this alienation, this sense of disparagement and humiliation.

Thus not only is it essential that people, especially young people, are enabled to live lives of material and social dignity; but it is no less important that they feel a sense of connectedness to and responsibility for their wider society, both as individuals and as part of their respective communities.

In this regard, interfaith relations has a critical role to play. The value of hospitality is central to all religious traditions. Reaching out to welcome the other gives communities and their members a sense that they are accepted by other communities and helps them feel part of and contribute to the wider circle of identity, rather than be alienated from it. When this is done in respect of the spiritual core identity of the other, it has even greater impact and significance.

Interfaith collaboration thus play an invaluable role in enabling people and communities of different faiths to view their own religious identities and sense of belonging, as vehicles for a constructive contribution and enhancement for the wellbeing of society as a whole.