



## DAVID ROSEN

International Director of Interreligious Affairs, American Jewish Committee (AJC)

**Pierre Morel, Director of the Pharos Observatory of cultural and religious pluralism**

We stay in the same region with Dr Rosen.

Dr Rosen is multi-continental, having been a rabbi in South Africa and the Great Rabbi of Ireland. He has a great responsibility in the American Jewish Committee and also advises the Great Rabbinate of Israel. There are many dimensions to your reading of the situation.

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Following on from Dr. Sammak's comments, let me observe that before there were Christians, there was also another religion in the Middle East. Therefore I as a Jew, am indigenously from the Middle East, the Holy Land.

I came here to this conference with my very wise wife and in preparation for this session, I asked her how she would describe religion; she answered it was like a marriage, in that it is either fantastic or terrible. There is a lot of truth in that, but there is something else as well; many marriages are very boring - not mine I assure you - and very often that is a problem with religion ; but that is another issue, what you do with religion when it is so terribly boring.

This insight of my wife's is actually an insight from the Talmud, a remarkable comment from the rabbis 2,000 years ago, who said that Torah could either be the elixir of life or the elixir of death. That is an amazingly honest auto-critique. Many religious people do not like to hear that, and many of them will say that if religion is abused it is not the problem of religion but of the exploitation of religion for particular partisan purposes. That may be right; but I am not sure how easily we can let religion off the hook. His All-Holiness has stated that violence in the name of religion is not religion, and if we all had religious leaders like His All-Holiness, we would not have any problems with religion; unfortunately, not all religious leaders agree with that, and we find that there are people who do terrible things in the name of religion.

The question is also related to my experiences in Ireland, in South Africa, and in Jerusalem. Generally things improved when I left South Africa and Ireland. Accordingly there is a move to kick me out of Jerusalem in the hope that things will get better there too. However, part of what you can see in those contexts is how religion was and is terribly abused. People would say that religion was not the source of the problem, that these were territorial conflicts, and that religion was exploited by people for their own particular purposes, but this still begs the question. If religion is so noble and ethical, how and why is religion so easily exploited? Even if religion is so many different things in different places, it is still all too often abused in different destructive ways. This of course poses a challenge for politicians and policymakers. What should their response be to it?

An eminent American sociologist of religion has pointed out that religion consists of three Bs – belief, behaviour and belonging. Let us put belief aside for the moment, as it is not the most germane to our question. Behaviour of course *is*, as we have heard from previous speakers, in terms of the ethics that religion should be teaching. But the critical issue to understand in relation to the exploitation and manipulation of religion, is the third B, the B of belonging, which relates to the question of identity. Identity gives us an understanding of who and what we are, not just as individuals but as members of families, communities and nations, as people. Therefore, it is wrapped up with our understanding not just of who we are but of whom we should be; and that "**being**" which is connected with belonging is what religion - sociologically, and I would say also substantially spiritually - is all about.

When people feel they do not truly belong in a broader context, then they feel alienated from it ; and when they are alienated, then they react negatively to the environment which alienates them. Then they seek to give themselves some justification, some understanding of why they are righteous and why that which is rejecting them is not. This

reflects our understanding of who we are, and because religion seeks to give meaning to that understanding, religion itself is so inextricably bound up with self-understanding.

The Pew study indicates that 85% of our world today defines itself in religious terms. That might sound strange to western European ears, but that means that “secular” Western Europe is part of that tiny 15%. But if we do not want people who feel religiously connected, especially in immigrant populations, to feel alienated to the extent that they turn to those religious sources, and exploit them in a violent way, we have to ask what is the correct thing to do. It might have sounded right in Egypt in the 1920s to say, ‘Religion for God and a nation for the people,’ but that is not a reality anymore. In parenthesis I would say that I am actually quite fascinated to know what it meant, whether it meant God was in a little church in the parish and had nothing to do with health, social services, wellbeing, the empowerment of women, dealing with poverty, and therefore dealing with all the social issues? It is a problematic idea if not disingenuous, but even if you agree with that slogan, it simply will not work today. As indicated, many from the 85% I spoke about, are now in that “secular” world that defined itself within the 15%. Today, to believe that you can privatise religion and say it is for the home but not for the public square is to live in Cloud Cuckoo Land. That is not the reality anymore; there is a different world you have to contend with, and politicians have to address the subject in a different way from the past.

Simply put, politicians cannot afford to ignore that dimension and do so at their peril. If you do not want religion to be part of the problem, you have to make it part of the solution. You can see how that was done well in the places where I lived: in Ireland, after religion was exploited so terribly, it was a critical factor in bringing dignity and mutual respect on the part of the politicians as a source of healing in that society; in South Africa, it was not just that Desmond Tutu was a charismatic man, but that all the religious leaders fashioned a new understanding of a social contract in South Africa. The politicians, and especially Mandela, understood profoundly that if you do not want religion to be part of the problem, you have to make it part of the solution.

That is the case in the Middle East, and I cannot talk about the whole of it, but when the Arab Spring broke out, a major European media print forum contacted me and asked what my advice to Europe would be. I said that I understood Catherine Ashton was on her way to the Middle East, and while meetings with the heads of all the different factions were important, it was important also to meet with mainstream religious leaders, not to marginalise them and simply play into the hands of the militants. Obviously, I was just talking to the wall. When people woke up to the importance of engaging religion, it was a little late in the day, and it is the same where I live, in Jerusalem. We have managed to form a Holy Land Council which represents all the religions of the Holy Land. It came out of a meeting in Alexandria in 2002, and this Council has been around since 2007-2008, involving the Palestinian Muslim authorities, the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, and all the patriarchs of the Holy Land. This council has three purposes: to keep open avenues of communication between religious leaders, to combat incitement and defamation, and to support a political solution to the conflict so that two nations and three religions may flourish in the land.

Have any of the politicians engaged the council? It is not so difficult to understand the caution of the local leaders if they do not see the international brokers taking the religious leaders seriously. The Americans who are coming to try to bring some form of resolution to the conflict have ignored, not just the Council, but all the religious leaders. I do not know how many times Senator Mitchell was in the Holy Land, and Senator Kerry is coming and going, and even has a representative in Martin Indyk living there. They have not met with a single religious leader, not with a Christian leader, let alone with a Muslim or Jewish leader, let alone with the Council.

What is this syndrome? This is what Socrates referred to as *akrasia*. It means you work against your own interests, because you are saying to those religious leaders that, at best, they are irrelevant, and at worse they are part of the problem. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, because religious leaders and many in their communities then conclude that what politicians are doing is not in their interests. Unfortunately, in our part of the world, although the Christian leaders are better, most of the Muslim and certainly the Jewish leaders are not of the highest quality, and the people in the positions are not the most spiritual, not the most learned, not the wisest and not the best, but that certainly does not mean they are irrelevant. They are in positions that represent the identities of the peoples, the belonging of the peoples, and if you do not address this issue of identity and belonging, it will come back to haunt you. You have to make it part of the solution if you do not want it to be part of the problem, and as soon as politicians and diplomats understand that, the quicker they will work for their own interests and not become chronic *akrasia*cs.



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Thank you David, very strong message and very topical and timely in view of what we heard yesterday and today and even before yesterday.