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**TOWARD JERUSALEM: EARTHLY FOR EACH AND HEAVENLY  
FOR ALL DEVELOPING A CULTURAL PROGRAM: READING HISTORY  
FOR THE SAKE OF THE FUTURE.**

Heavenly visions

In a recent one-day mock negotiations on the final status of Jerusalem, Jewish, Muslim and Christian speakers made their arguments based on visions of the heavenly Jerusalem. The visions presented were really projections of the different experiences and histories that each has of the city. The heavenly vision is intricately webbed into the collective identity of each and thus remains exclusive, at least as a defining boundary that distinguishes each collective identity from the two others. In one sense, speaking of the heavenly Jerusalem becomes inadvertently an emphasis of the earthly Jerusalem and of its unique and different significance for each of the three monotheistic traditions.

But I have no difficulty in accepting this reality of the three different versions of the heavenly Jerusalem. In fact, I have no problem in accepting many more versions of the heavenly Jerusalem. Not because I am a subscriber to multiple visions but simply because these versions reflect the earthly experiences of the adherents of the different faiths and hence each of them is legitimate in its own right. Jerusalem, as should be expected, is read differently by the different experiences and histories of the different religions.

If we are to go together towards Jerusalem, the question becomes what choice do we make? Do we start with attempting to unify the heavenly vision or do we proceed by accepting the differing earthly realities and experiences of the city and its various inhabitants? If we mean by going together toward Jerusalem a project on which we all agree then we need to find the common denominators and unifying functions of the Jerusalem we all seek. This enterprise becomes a universal project to Europeans and Middle Easterners, on the one hand and to Jews, Moslems and Christians, on the other.

But crafting a version of the heavenly Jerusalem on which we all agree is certainly different from imposing our different versions on each other. Hence the exercise of crafting a common version may be a laudable exercise but is certainly going to add to the different versions of Jerusalem that so many of us already profess. Not all professors of different visions will subscribe to a potentially unifying vision and many will not even care to consider it, to start with. This is simply because contemplating a different vision necessitates an examination of one's own vision. It also requires the willingness to reassess, modify and incorporate new elements into one's comfortable vision. But all these exceptions and reservations should not let us shun away from proposing a common vision and working towards it.

An earthly proposition

To get to the heavenly Jerusalem, we are all challenged to start with the earthly Jerusalem. In this sense, present day Jerusalem can be viewed as a microcosm of the large world, at least of the Mediterranean world. Out of necessity and through the crossroads of history, different religious, ethnic and national groups live next to each other: each of them has its traditions, culture, worldview and convictions. What appears normal and acceptable in one tradition may provoke indignation and rejection in the other. The meaning of rites, rituals, ceremonies and age-old ways of doing things is exclusive. Others may not understand and certainly will not take time to share and appreciate. In fact, the same event is interpreted in two and more different opposite accounts, each within its own context and historical justification. In order to avoid the temptation to acknowledge and to understand some revert to the notion often repeated that all adherents of the three monotheistic religions are the children of Abraham. And indeed we are! But we are the children of Abraham each in our own and different way. The ethnocentrism or religiocentrism that

is exhibited by the three monotheistic religions is real. To hope that the future vision of Jerusalem should be molded simply out of the religious convictions of its inhabitants sounds to me quite an implausible proposition. Even genuinely religious people are not so accommodating as to share with others what is so highly valued in their religions, value systems and ways of doing things.

The principle of non-interference and the mirage of coexistence

Hence the question is where do we start? I would propose that we start with earthly Jerusalem with all its differences, disagreements, variations, experiences and visions. The common denominator should be to accept the principle of non-interference in the ways and traditions of others. It is a simple principle but is it enough to start on the process toward an eventually unifying vision of Jerusalem? Before answering, let me elaborate on what I mean by the principle of non-interference. Non interference means that a bird's eye view on the city would show different quarters and different activities; religious, cultural and mundane. Each of these quarters has its boundaries, often physical.

Each of these activities is mostly exclusive to the people of the quarter or of the religious group. This is not hermetic exclusion but rather the exclusion that comes from the proximity and subsequent cohesion of a particular group living side by side. It is also the exclusion that comes from sharing the same religion and most likely the same culture and traditions.

When these different groups go about exercising their daily lives and celebrating the recurring yearly cycles of religious and other events and traditions, Jerusalem is theirs. Thus the different versions of Jerusalem reflect the different experiences of daily and yearly routines of religious, cultural and other events. So long as each group runs its life without interference from the other groups, there is a semblance of peace and co-existence. This peace and co-existence is not based on mutual recognition. It is based on non-interference rather than recognition. This peace and co-existence is not policy directed and implemented from above rather it is created out of the fact that each religious, national and cultural group sticks to its corner, so to speak, and feels relatively comfortable with its restricted environment. Some refer to this as cognitive mapping whereby the group and its members get to internalize their territory and its boundaries. This is the sacred ground but it is also the earthly physical lines that separate us and, paradoxically, integrate us into the whole mosaic of the earthly Jerusalem. The politicians accommodate themselves to this reality as others but, as elsewhere in the world, they like to take credit when things work out naturally, citing their wisdom and long-term sight.

But would this peace and co-existence and its motivating force of non- interference lead us into the unifying vision of Jerusalem? Certainly not but it could be a starting point to seek a different sort of co-existence based on mutual acknowledgement and recognition. To arrive to this kind of co-existence is something desired but it implies that we have to overcome the different versions of Jerusalem and its histories. It also means that we have to settle the political claims and counterclaims. We also need to look into ways to diminish the social and economic inequities, inherited in part but clearly a product of power distribution, that divide the various groups in the city.

A history of conflict: religion and conquest

Jerusalem is the eternal city not because of the political claims of this side or that but precisely because it has been repeatedly conquered for the significance it came to have in the history and religion of the various conquering groups. I have read in Arabic the account of Amin Maalouf of the conquest of Jerusalem by the Crusaders. It is definitely not nice or civilised reading but it makes one a little more mature and wiser, perhaps. Using religion to conquer But the disparities in wealth, standard of living, opportunities and life chances pose a formidable challenge to the cultural program suggested. It is not like saying that if there are no disparities then there will be no need for a cultural program or for the willingness to reassess and re-examine history. The history of Europe shows that even similar standards of living do not do away with potential conflict and dissension among nations and groups of the continent. One could only imagine how the

disparities can be woven into our misconceptions of each other to render any effective common reading of history impossible.

#### Different perceptions of the same events

The cultural program is needed to also assess why different groups perceive the same event differently and why particularistic projections of a religious, nationalistic or ethnic nature are woven almost spontaneously into the particular reading. This is especially significant to the Middle East where not only the nation but especially religion plays an important organising role of the community and society. In Jerusalem, when people, ordinary people, speak of the prophets, the crusades or other distant events or characters, they speak as if the events just took place or that the personalities mentioned are still alive and influential. We carry with us our different histories and we offer them as justifications for our political, religious and national positions. We are clearly far away from a common project of reading history and reassessing it to become the history of all instead of the history of some.

#### The religious element

This is perhaps an additional reason why we are in need of a cultural program. Specifically, we need to encourage the inclusion of the religious element into such a program. To go back to the general notion that Jews, Christians and Moslems are all the children of Abraham: this is a notion that should be picked up by the cultural program and explored. If we wish we need to deconstruct the notion and to explore what went wrong with it and why? In specific, we need to know why and how each of the three monotheistic religions went its own way and turned its back on the two others, irrespective of will to dialogue and to exchange now present among some of the three religions? A cultural program should then enable us to prepare the ground for the potential of acknowledgement by rereading history and understanding it in a common manner. This is not a call to negate history or to justify horrible and vicious acts. It is simply a call to explore how history affects all of us and how it divides us, even today. If we can get to the point of seeing history as a multifaceted mirror with its different pieces showing the components of our historical make up then hopefully we can labor together to put the pieces together to the benefit of all. The mirror, however, will never be one whole but at least juxtaposing the different components together we can perhaps discover our common humanity and that we all in the end are seeking the same goods and earthly and heavenly reinforcement and rewards. Such a reading will hopefully give us the courage and the wisdom to seek justice and to ensure dignity in our dealings with each other. It is for this reason that recognizing the wrong we have done to others becomes an important step towards healing and reconciliation. Politicians often do not offer such statements for fear of the consequences; statesmen and leaders, however, dare to make such statements. A statement by a religious leader seeking forgiveness in humility is intended as a strong message to move hearts to the human commonality that unites all of us. When such a statement is offered by an ordinary person, it carries only limited weight and its effects, hence, remain quite limited.

Eventual reconciliation: from the earthly Jerusalem to the heavenly.

The proposed cultural program hence should have an agenda that will move those willing on the road towards acknowledgement, healing and eventual reconciliation. While this can be accomplished by providing financial and material incentives, the cultural incentive should not be disregarded or belittled. Matter by itself, even with improved standards of living and life chances, may not change people. A cultural agenda, shared by all, may move some of us forward.

The earthly Jerusalem of each carries within it the wounds and pains of the recent and ancient history. It also carries with it the comfort of staying away from other groups and adversaries. Hence, social distance provides us with the relative short-run peace and quiet within our group boundaries. Power politics may provide additional relief with the feeling of ascendancy and the

superiority that comes with might which is seen as unchallenged and lasting. This is, however, only a short-run proposition; the long run proposition is to acknowledge and to dare to move on to healing and reconciliation. Perhaps the economic and political developments taking place in the European community will force on us in Palestine and Israel and indeed in the whole of the Middle East to reconsider our past as well as our future. But it is certain that survivability for us, as small states, cannot be secured in isolation and separation from each other but only in eventual joining together. The cultural program will challenge what appears to be comfortable and exclusionist solutions and will, instead, seek ways for a more comprehensive framework that will include justice and equity as desired overall objectives in the march forward.

In one sense, subscribing to a new cultural program entails more pain and challenge than subscribing to an ethnocentric view of history and to a one-sided perspective of the group, nation or religion. But the pain and challenge that we undergo would ensure that once a new Middle East emerge, it would be based on solid grounds rather than on quicksand bases that will last no longer than a generation or two.

#### Integrating the parts into one complementary whole

The cultural program would have to have as an item on its agenda to help move all of us in the earthly Jerusalem and Mediterranean from the misleadingly comfortable non-interference to the painful acknowledgement of each other, including our different versions of history, religion and collective memories and identities. A further undertaking for the cultural program is to engage people of our region and Mediterranean basin in the process of healing the wounds of recent and distant history. Healing will involve more than psychological, spiritual and historical redressing as it needs to answer the concrete challenges of injustices committed and the inequities and disparities that make some of us powerful and rich and others weak and poor. No reconciliation is possible without redressing or at least attempting to redress these inequities and disparities. Finally, the success of the cultural program and other similar undertakings will be measured by how much each different version of the earthly Jerusalem integrate into a holistic version of the heavenly Jerusalem. I honestly cannot see separate heavenly Jerusalem for Jews, Christians and Moslems. There is only one heavenly Jerusalem and it is our responsibility to construct it and to ensure that more and more people subscribe to it. If we come to this position then the crusades, conquests and wars that seek to make Jerusalem exclusive to the one side or the other lose their significance. Instead a common vision of the heavenly Jerusalem will unite all of us to live decent lives; to be honest, fair and just to our neighbours; to understand that we are not alone and that our consideration of others is as elementary for our survival as for theirs. This is not utopian rhetoric but rather a vision that should be in the heart of any cultural program undertaken to commemorate the 900th anniversary of the crusades.