

Matalon

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I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude to His Highness Sheikh Hamad, Emir of Qatar for his great leadership and vision as well as for his kind hospitality. Also my gratitude to HE Ahmed bin Abdulla Al-Mahmoud, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, and in particular to the Foreign Minister's Assistant for Follow up Affairs and Chairman of the Conference Permanent Organizing Committee HE Mohamed Abdulla Al-Rumaihi and to the Chairman of this conference Dr. Aisha Al-Manai. I am very honored to be back among you and to have the opportunity to continue our dialogue.

Since my brief remarks are about RELIGION AND GLOBALIZATION, I think it is pertinent to mention that I was born and grew up in Argentina, where my grandparents arrived from Aleppo, Syria. I have been living in New York City for the past 24 years. That makes me - an American-LatinAmerican-Arab-Jew. I am sure that many of you have similarly complex identities, which is testimony of the acceleration of globalization in the twentieth century.

According to a Jewish sacred text, God instructed the angel Gabriel to gather dust from the four corners of the earth in preparation for the creation of Adam, the first human.

The Creator's intention was that every person should belong and feel at home anywhere and everywhere in the world. God created us as globalized creatures.

Some believe that globalization has reached alarmingly destructive levels and must be stopped at all cost. But globalization is unstoppable: it is here to stay and it will continue to expand. Moreover, there are vast and important benefits to globalization and we must embrace them. Our task as religious leaders is to guide this process to be one that enhances God's creation and God's creatures and that advances peace and cooperation in a way that reflects God's glory.

I will attempt to spell out a few of the positions that religions and religious leaders need to embrace if we are to guide globalization in positive and holy ways.

The current process of globalization is powered by four engines: the markets, the multinational corporations, the media and the internet.

These four engines have brought humans closer to each other than ever before, across all boundaries. At the touch of one button we are in each other's faces and in each other's lives. We are exposed like never before to people who are totally unfamiliar to us, people with very different beliefs and lifestyles. As we are forced to face the other, we often feel threatened and vulnerable. We may feel insecure and afraid. We see the world as us and them.

Powerful politicians and religious leaders have exploited those fears and have promoted tribalism, they have shaped the consciousness of billions of people into an "us against them" paradigm.

Religious leaders like us must struggle courageously to preserve and celebrate our differences and our diversity while affirming the value and dignity of the other and his faith, and our kinship with each other. We are different and yet we constitute one family.

Religious leaders must cultivate a global consciousness: we must be concerned about the human condition beyond our national, territorial or religious boundaries. The Jewish suffering during the Holocaust is taboo for some of us, the suffering of the Palestinian people is taboo for others of us, one cannot mention the current genocide in Darfur in certain circles, etc. If we are truly religious then nothing that affects God's creatures should be alien to us.

My first point then is that religious leaders must fight the tribalist mentality.

Second, religious leaders must seek to impose morality on the forces of the market. Markets are not moral or immoral, they are morally neutral. Markets are not guided by an internal moral compass:

Markets are about profits and bottom lines, and are oblivious of their effects on individuals and communities. The benefits of globalization - wealth, technology, sanitation, health, education- are not being distributed evenly. In fact, the inequalities around the globe are vast, and they are growing.

Religious leaders must demand that the strength of societies be measured not only by financial and economic indicators but rather by the amount of human dignity, justice and compassion that globalized societies generate.

Third, globalization has encouraged consumption, and consumerism is out of control. The severe environmental problems that the world faces today are a testimony to that fact, as well as the notion that having more, that discarding the old and purchasing the newest and latest will automatically give us a sense of self-worth and security.

Religious leaders must draw from our traditions that teach the values of conservation, moderation, humility and restraint.

Fourth, globalization is obliterating and wiping out cultural diversity. The great fear is that the whole world will look and think and feel like America. The biblical story of the Tower of Babel reminds us that the imposition of uniformity is contrary to God's plan. Apparently God's plan is diversity- biological, personal, cultural and religious. The richness and the endless possibilities of life are greatly threatened when diversity and uniqueness are eliminated.

Religious traditions must work to preserve the particular and the local, while not losing sight of our goal of unity within diversity.

My fifth and final point is that globalization has promoted personal gain and individualism often at the expense of family and community. Religious traditions must fight hard to preserve the values of family and community.

Globalization has promoted competition. While competition certainly has positive aspects, we must draw from the wisdom of our religious traditions that stress the value of solidarity.

Globalization has divided humanity between those who work incessantly and those who have little or no work. Religious traditions stress the importance of work as a source of dignity and as the expression of human creativity, while they remind us of the value of rest, of time for the soul and for the intellect, for family, for friendship and for community, as well as for giving of ourselves for others and for the common good.

These are some of the challenges that we face today. I pray that we embrace them fully, equipped with the immeasurable wisdom and holiness which God has given to each of our faith traditions. May God help us to prevail and to fulfill the vision of peace, justice and blessing for all humanity. Amen.

Rabbi José Rolando Matalon was born in Argentina. He studied in Buenos Aires, Montreal, Jerusalem and New York, where he was ordained in 1986 at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Since 1986 he serves as rabbi of Congregation Bnai Jeshurun, a synagogue community of 1,800 households (4,000 people) in New York City. Rabbi Matalon is active in interfaith dialogue and cooperation, in organizations that promote social justice as well as organizations that advance peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.