

Faith and Tolerance: The Grace of Imperfection

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ABSTRACT

Sheikh Abdullah Ibn Kathir Wathila ibn Al-Asqa' said, "O Messenger of Allah, is it part of tribalism that a man loves his people?" The Prophet (PBUH) said: "No, rather it is tribalism that he supports his people in wrongdoing." In a time that is described with various and esoteric academic terms like extreme polarization, devolution into social and political tribalism characterized by absolutisms and authoritarianism, and zero-sum existentialist oppositionalism, there is a desperate need to rebuild a safe middle ground for divided communities to simply rehumanize one another through encounter, communication, and respect. We are in a period where optimism for growing human prosperity, whether in economic and development gains, rights and freedoms, or political and social participation, seems to have given way to increased rhetoric of group conflict. And, while faith remains a constant in the lives of the vast majority of the human population, religious groups are not immune to these pressures, and in some cases are cracking under the strain or opting for ideological conflict. Some faithful seek to solve shared problems while others feel righteous frustration that propels them toward mistrust, anger, and hatred. But a diverse world will only provide for broad and mutual benefit across difference when religion functions as a powerful motivator for compassion and care, rather than a driver of violence. Only a tiny minority - albeit a very vocal one - sees their faith as encouraging them to harm others. Most religious believers, like most people, seek stability and security, and the liberty to worship as they wish. And the key to such acceptance and freedom is to offer the same to others. As a sacred Hadith in the Islamic tradition states, the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) was asked, "Who, O Messenger of Allah (is not a believer)?" He replied: "One whose neighbor does not feel safe from his evil." The International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD), leveraging 25 years of work across the globe to bridge religious considerations with the global peacebuilding policy and practice, has turned significant focus to addressing increased threats to social stability in one of the most visible pluralist democracies in the world: the United States. In a time when there is increased pressure to define our loyalties in opposition to those who do not agree or "belong", and where politics and media reinforce simplified and inflexible ideas of identity, what tools can we employ to increase mutual understanding, rebuild community across difference, and strengthen pluralist institutions? In my talk, I will explore the paradoxical but powerful role of religious faith and belief to encourage pluralism and strengthen and protect diversity in society. I will draw on ICRD's experience to promote the religious values that expand inquiry over inflexibility, encourage humble aspiration over absolutist righteousness, and empower persuasion over coercion. Ironically, the key to changing people's minds may be by listening, rather than arguing, and the power of diverse religious beliefs may hold the key to lifting up the

common virtues of respect and mutual care that point the way to a more stable future.