“Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has.”

- Margaret Mead

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

THE CORONA VIRUS PANDEMIC AND RELIGIOUS-BASED CONFLICT

Two great negative forces are sweeping the world today, one apparently caused by nature, the other certainly caused by man. But both have the same effect of causing loss of life, disruption of families, business and property - and both causing fear and hysteria throughout the world. Many countries on all continents are affected. One is only a year old, the other many decades old. One, based on history, cannot be eliminated; the other based on logic can be substantially reduced to the point of virtual elimination.

Historically, diseases such as the virus have not been eliminated. They either run their course and become dormant or they are temporarily “controlled” by such remedies as vaccines. And many of these diseases which we thought we have controlled with vaccines and similar treatments, return in either different mutations or in different areas of the world, or both. Examples abound. For instance, we thought we had tuberculosis eliminated but it showed its ugly face again after years. Circa 1.4 million died from this disease as recently as 2019. The same with Malaria a parasite-caused disease. And, of course, there is the Flu.

We’ve tried to control Influenza, commonly known as the Flu, for decades finally developing vaccines, “flu shots” often mandatorily given to school children and strongly advised for seniors. But this has had only limited effect. For example, in the USA there are still 50,000-60,000 deaths attributable to the flu each year. More than all traffic and airplane deaths combined.

This, in spite of the best efforts of our finest medical and scientific experts.

And then there is the corona virus. Experts have said that wearing masks, social distancing and minimal groups of gatherings of people will reduce the number of virus cases and deaths and eliminate the disease’s disastrous effects. This hasn’t happened. In fact in many parts of the world their numbers are increasing. Governments have imposed so-called lockdowns which often temporarily help but at the terrible cost of reducing peoples’ liberties, loss of jobs, financial stress, suicide, bankruptcy, and much more. And, as of this writing as the virus cases again have increased, so many countries are now again resorting to those extraordinary measures with the expectation that, this time, they will work.

Now, recently, we are placing our hope in controlling the corona virus with vaccines. Again, such vaccines cannot eliminate the virus, but the belief is that it can be controlled. Will its effect be similar to that of the flu shot? Or, with luck, will the virus simply run its course and then leave us alone? Based on a posteriori experience, the odds in favor of that happening are not good. Consider, we have never eliminated, much less permanently controlled, any of nature’s effects. Have we stopped hurricanes? Floods? Earthquakes? Climate change, Previous viruses? Should we expect different results this time? As Albert Einstein once said: "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

On the other hand religious-based conflict and its ensuing violence, while not being totally eliminated because we cannot control people’s characters, can be reduced to the point where it no longer is a significant

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factor in the world as viruses apparently always will be. Why? Because it is caused by man rather than with viruses, which are caused by nature.

The Middle East agreements recently engineered by the USA bringing, for the first time, normal diplomatic, commercial, communicational and personal relations between several additional Arab countries and Israel is unprecedented. And, this achievement bodes well for the peaceful future of that area of the world if it continues to be implemented and expanded. It can mean, first that those nations don’t use conflict to settle their differences, being united in facing their real enemy, Iran instead. And second, no bloodshed in the sand from the internecine wars allows them to face the problem of the violence caused by ISIS and similar groups, using religion as their excuse for attacking all who are not of their faith and belief, i.e. causing religious-base conflict and violence.

This initial step, if the process can be continued, will allow so many in that part of the world to begin - for the first time - to attack the causes of religious-based conflict rather than only their effects, as has been the case up until now. To paraphrase that famous Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu: “The longest journey begins with the first step”.

Terry O. Trowbridge

HOTSPOTS

Mozambique

At least 50 people were beheaded by so-called militant Islamists in northern Mozambique, according to multiple reports last November. The attackers, who were allegedly linked to the Islamic State (ISIS), conducted a series of attacks on villages in that country in early November. At least one village saw a football field turned into an "execution ground", where the attackers decapitated and chopped up bodies. A spokesman for Mozambique’s police, had said during a subsequent briefing that attackers abducted women and children and burned down homes. That gas-rich Cabo Delgado province where the attacks took place has been the site of several attacks carried out since 2017. Up to 2,000 people have died during this conflict, while roughly 430,000 have been left homeless.

U.S.A.

The number of anti-Semitic hate crimes in the United States increased significantly in 2019 the latest recorded year, according to the FBI. This was a year that saw three lethal attacks against Jews in the USA. Anti-Semitic incidents once again made up the majority of hate crimes based on religion. The FBI recorded 953 hate crimes against Jews in 2019, a 14 percent increase from the 835 recorded in 2018, and similar to the 938 recorded in 2017. In 2019, hate crimes against Jews constituted 62% of all hate crimes based on religion, slightly up from 58% in 2018 and 2017.

Nigeria

Religious-based violence continues in this sad country. In November, at least 110 people were killed in an attack on a village in north-east Nigeria and blamed on the Boko Haram jihadist group. “At least 110 civilians were ruthlessly killed and many others were wounded in this attack,” Edward Kallon, a UN official, said in a statement after initial tolls indicated 43 with at least 70 dead from the massacre by Boko Haram fighters. “The incident is the most violent direct attack against innocent civilians this year,” Kallon said, adding: “I call for the perpetrators of this heinous and senseless act to be brought to justice.” The attack took place in the village of Koshobe near the main city of Maiduguri, with assailants targeting farmers in the rice fields. The Borno state governor, Babagana Umara Zulum, attended the burial on Sunday in the nearby village of Zabarmari of 43 bodies recovered on Saturday, saying the toll will surely rise after search operations resumed.

The assailants tied up the agricultural workers and slit their throats, according to a pro-government anti-jihadist militia. The victims were among laborers from Sokoto state in north-west Nigeria, about 1,000 km (600 miles) away, who had travelled to the north-east to find work, it said. Six others were wounded in the attack and eight remained missing. Kallon cited “reports that several women may have been kidnapped”, and called for their immediate release and return to safety. This attack took place as voters went to the polls in long-delayed local elections in Borno state. The polls had been repeatedly postponed because of an increase in attacks by Boko Haram and a rival jihadist faction, ISWAP.
Azerbaijan

Pending at the European Court of Human Rights are 34 known cases relating to violations of freedom of religion or belief in this country, involving 61 individuals and 5 different communities. In one of the cases, a decision is expected shortly in the case of a woman who was fined for offering religious literature on the street. Other cases cover punishments for leading mosque prayers and holding religious meetings, refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience, and finally the state's dominant religious censorship.

China

Religious repression has intensified across China since President Xi Jinping took office in 2013. The brutal crackdown on minority Muslims in the northwestern region of Xinjiang — where mosques and madrasas are being demolished, and more than 1 million Uighurs have been detained in re-education camps - has sparked international outrage. But the Communist Party's assault on faith is not limited to Islam. Authorities have used the world's distraction over the corona virus pandemic to accelerate an ongoing campaign against Christianity as well as others.

Officially atheist, the party sees adherence to any faith, particularly those with foreign origins such as Christianity and Islam, as a threat to its dominance. So Xi has embarked on the "sinicization" of religious practice, ordering Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Christian leaders to integrate Chinese communist thought into their belief systems.

COSTS

There are at least three kinds of costs to individuals, businesses and governments from religious-based conflict and violence namely financial, economic and hidden. As an example of the latter, it has been shown from studies in Spain which have determined that exposure of expectant mothers to violence, especially terrorism, has detrimental effects on birth outcomes - in terms of average birth weight (lower), prevalence of low birth weight (higher) and number of “normal” babies (lower). Due to space limitations, however, below we describe only financial costs.

In the past we have described the financial costs to the United States alone of the Iraq and Afghan conflicts as they continued to accrue. Since the USA has removed most of its troops from Iraq and is completing the removal of its forces in Afghanistan those costs, while still increasing, will now reflect the cost of advisory support of local forces as well as other indirect costs as they incur. However, additional costs are now being incurred because of the threat by ISIS in Iraq, Syria, other parts of the Middle East and Africa as well.

In Afghanistan, for instance the USA, even though their military itself continues to exit, spends enormous amounts of dollars a year for such things as training costs of the Afghan military as well as humanitarian aid. Costs are estimated to be circa $50 million per year. Then there was the Department of Defense 2020 increase of $243 billion to the base budget of the DoD. These figures, though not included, substantially increase the interest on the national debt. Total costs since 2001 are approximately $2 trillion.

In Iraq costs are again increasing due to the recent and new insertion of “non-combat” troops, advisors and their support, as well as the initiation of more and more air activity and humanitarian aid. Costs since 2003 total $2.0+ trillion with an additional cost of $600+ billion in benefits owed Iraq war veterans. Add to this circa $4+ trillion of interest on expenses for the war since 2003.

The costs of confronting ISIS alone, (not the only instigator of religious-based conflict and violence) and not including Syria or African countries, are $50+ billion a year and are increasing dramatically each month.

Finally, total costs for combating religious-based conflict to the USA alone since 2001 are more than $5.2+ trillion, not including the ensuing interest on US debt because of these expenditures of an additional $813+ million.

Some may disagree with these totals or the way they are calculated, but it is fair to say that they continue to be astonishing. While they may not be 100% accurate, they do at least, generally reflect the costs generated by these religious-based conflicts as borne by the United States. Note that these financial costs are for attacking the effects of religious-based conflict alone. None of these costs are associated with attacking its causes.
ABOUT THE CENTER

What the Center, as a totally independent NGO, does is unique. No other such organization has as its sole goal the reduction of religious-based conflict through a practical and specific approach which goes beyond tolerance. We believe this problem is larger than religions themselves, not within their total control, and one which cannot be solved by them alone. They need our help. Non-believers and governments alike must work to support them in this effort.

In this respect, the Center’s primary mission is education. To educate, we must first publicize the problem of religious-based conflict and show how it affects all of us - either directly or indirectly; either physically or financially - and in many instances, both. We then educate by offering an approach towards its reduction not heretofore recognized, showing how we must go beyond tolerance, the current mantra for its so-called resolution, if we are to succeed. We describe this step in practical, realistic, not altruistic, terms.

The Center does not purport to be able to resolve this problem; rather we show how the people and their governments can approach it and eventually cause change in the direction of its reduction. Since humans are imperfect, we cannot expect to totally resolve the problem of religious-based conflict, but we can, through this method, substantially reduce it to at least manageable proportions.

You can help reduce religious-based conflict in the world – probably more than you think you can. Even though individuals have limited power when acting alone, when they act as part of a group with a common purpose, this power increases geometrically. By supporting the Center - morally, actively or financially, you do just that - have more impact. For those of you who provide your moral support, we thank you. For those who either as formal Volunteers or as individuals discuss with others the Center’s work, we cannot be more appreciative. For those who have the financial means and make charitable contributions to support our efforts, we are forever grateful to you.

Our cause is unique. Our message is spreading daily to more and more people and governments throughout the world. Our work continues to receive praise from those who know of it.

But we must reach more people and more governments in order to increase our impact. And in this process, we must not only publicize the problem of religious-based conflict, as well as its astonishing and growing costs to us all; but we must also explain why tolerance is not the answer to this problem. And, finally, we are leading the way towards educating the people and their governments, showing them how to attain this goal with a practical and realistic plan.

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