RELIGIONS ARE THE GATEWAY FOR PEACE AND SECURITY

Dr. Emiliano Stornelli

Emiliano Stornelli *is founding Chairman of the Religion & Security Council (RSC), Rome (http://www.religionandsecurity.org/). He established RSC with the aim to promote conflicts resolution and a cooperative approach to security by active engagement in the religious dimension of international crises. RSC springs from the cooperation and outreach activities he previously led as Director of the Mediterranean & Middle East Program at Italian Atlantic Committee (Rome, 2011-2016), and as Advisor to the President of the Atlantic Treaty Association (Brussels, 2014-2016). Specialized in Strategic Studies at the Center for High Defense Studies (Italian Ministry of Defense), Mr. Stornelli was Visiting Researcher at the Center for Transatlantic Relations, SAIS-Johns Hopkins University, and collaborated with the Military Center for Strategic Studies and the Italian Institute for Asia and the Mediterranean. Currently, he is also a Fellow of the International Association for Counter-Terrorism and Security Professionals – South-East Asia Region (IACSP SEA), Malaysia. Here are excerpts from his conversation with* ***Victor Edwin SJ****.*

You established the Religion & Security Council (RSC), where does this idea come from?

Many of the conflicts currently underway feature a significant religious dimension, particularly in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. Hence the need to develop a new approach that includes the religious factor in the strategic equation aimed at restoring peace and security conditions in areas of crisis. RSC was born to meet this demand, promoting the

reflection on the contribution that religions can effectively provide to advance conflicts resolution, as opposed to their misuse as triggers of extremism and violence.

Where religion and security intersect?

The most noticeable example of intersection between religion and security materializes on a theological level in the concept of the "Oneness of God." This may sound unusual, especially in Europe, where the mainstream education and cultural formation tend to snub or ignore notions pertaining to the religious sciences. The "Oneness of God" is the theological cornerstone of all Abrahamitic religions, as well as Hinduism. Each denomination articulates it in its own peculiar fashion, but all of them equally share this fundamental religious truth. Nevertheless, this concept is also often interpreted in an exclusivist way, to an extent that for many the meaning of the "Tawheed" statement "there is no God but God" - which is the basic common tenet between religions and thus the foundational principle of interreligious coexistence - has devolved into the conviction that "there is no God as you know it, but only as we know it." This misleading notion of the "Tawheed" statement is inscribed in the black flag of terrorist groups such ISIS and Al Qaeda, and therefore addressing such a key theological issue would certainly have a positive impact on the international security scenario.

How would it be possible to address the "Tawheed" issue?

Prior to becoming the slogan of terrorist groups, the exclusivist interpretation of the "Tawheed" statement has affected the traditional culture and the governance of interreligious relations in many countries, with negative consequences on interfaith harmony and peaceful coexistence. A proper religious education would prevent the spread of wrong religious knowledge and teachings in the society, primarily among the youth, contributing to cultivate a healthy

socio-cultural environment. Moreover, to further interreligious dialogue in the form of theological exchange would greatly help dispel theological misunderstandings, favoring a broader acceptance, and realization, of the Oneness of God as the basic common tenet between religions. An increased theological exchange would also be very useful to solve other contentious theological issues that feed radical beliefs and attitudes, such as the concept of "salvation."

The debate on the relevance of the religious factor in conflicts resolution and addressing extremism also draws attention to the role of the religious and political leaders. What are their responsibilities and how could they cooperate?

Religious and political leaders have the possibility to act in a complementary way. While the former is called to oppose radical instances and form a new generation of moderate faithful open to the encounter with other religions, the latter should enable the adoption of sound provisions to improve the education system and halt extremist propaganda and preaching. At the same time, religious and political leaders can work together to advance peace and security. In particular, interreligious dialogue holds the potential to facilitate the achievement of political and diplomatic settlements in areas of crisis, and to take peace-building forward in post-conflict situations.

What are the prospects of interreligious dialogue in conflicts resolution?

When conflicts are fueled by religious based-narratives and ideologies, interreligious dialogue is necessarily part of the solution. The Middle East is a case in point. No real and lasting peace will ever be achieved in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and other hotspots in the region, including the Holy Land, without addressing the religious dimension of these crises. A process of genuine interreligious dialogue would serve the purpose to

mend the fault lines within and between religions, clearing the way for a broader reconciliation on a historical and geopolitical level. The premise of such a process already exists, and dates back to the summits convened in Mecca and Madrid by the late king of Saudi Arabia Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz in 2008. More recently, during the 2016 Istanbul summit, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation officially called for the overcoming of sectarianism and for enhancing ecumenism within Islam, while the exchange between the Al Azhar University and the Vatican, and the landmark agreement signed by the Muslim World League and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, laid the basis for a new cooperation between Christians and Muslims on issues of common concern, starting with education and radicalization. As the tide of extremism in the Middle East starts to recede, in conjunction with the wane of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, there is a growing space for interreligious dialogue initiatives that would greatly help foster peaceful relations between states and different professions of faith. At this point in time, this is a unique opportunity that should not be wasted by the local actors and the international community.