

Closing Session

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 27, 2018 (KECSKEMÉT, THEATRE)

**“Shalom aleichem! Pax nobi! As-salamu alaykum! Béke legyem veled!
Peace be with you!”**

By Judith Banki

Closing Remarks

I shall try to respond to the question asked in our program: *What can we do as people of faith or none to work towards mutual understanding, reconciliation and peace in our specific contexts, often tainted by national, religious, ethnic and social conflicts?*

This is a difficult question and I do not pretend to have the answers, but I'll advance a few principles I believe are essential for reconciliation and mutual trust. First, we must tell each other our stories, both personal and communal. We cannot achieve reconciliation by suppressing historical memory. The first Secretary for Catholic-Jewish Relations appointed by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops after Vatican II, Fr. Edward Flannery, wrote: “Catholics have torn from their history books the pages that the Jews have memorized.” Indeed, most American Catholics and other Christians grow up completely innocent of the history of the Church's hostility to Jews and Judaism across the ages, a tradition summarised by Jules Isaac as “the teaching of contempt.” (And I use the term “innocent” in both its meanings: they didn't know about it, and they were not responsible for it.) But many inherited the negative images of Jews as deicides, as the enemies of Christianity, as the enemies of Jesus. For Jews, who have long memories, it was important to share the stories of forced conversion, of the slaughters during the Crusades, of the inquisition and the auto-da-fés, of the blood libel, of the massacres and pogroms of Eastern Europe. But sharing does not mean accusing. Just as the process of reconciliation in countries like South Africa required the telling of stories of those persecuted and discriminated against, so it is important to tell our stories. And it is equally important for us to hear the stories of others!

I do not say this to provoke guilt in a generation that is not guilty of these atrocities. Guilt is a poor counselor, and trying to provoke guilt creates resentment – which is the other side of the coin of guilt. No, I insist on opening the historical baggage we bear with us as a necessary basis for responsible citizenship. A person who enters the world of public life, education, religion or dialogue without having learned about the legacy of European antisemitism leading to the Shoah – the murder of one half of the Jews of Europe and one third of the Jews of the entire world – is like someone in my own country who moves into dialogue with the Black community without having learned about the degradation and brutality of slavery. (And there are people in my country who want to diminish or ignore that history.)

Second, I would say to my Christian, Muslim, practitioners of other faiths and secular partners: I accept you as a partner in healing the world in the fullness of our differences — not only in what we share, but in our differences. (I believe it is our differences that make us interesting.) I am suspicious of any efforts toward reconciliation that require the abandonment of particularities. A case in point: not long ago, I spoke with a young man who had been one of the producers of a traveling version of the show “Fiddler on the Roof.” He said when the show was shown in Japan, he was approached by a Japanese theater critic who asked him, “Do Americans understand this play? It is such a Japanese story!!”

I reflected at the time that it is in our particularities that we find our common humanity.

So I accept you with all your differences in culture, worship, language, history. And I affirm your rights and your freedom to practice your religion. But with one important caveat: your rights end where my rights begin. The dialogue cannot be abused for conversion or proselytizing, and in a pluralistic society, the public square should not privilege one sectarian faith over others.

This is easier said than done. There is a natural tendency to impose one’s own religious agenda onto public space, particularly when one’s religion is the majority faith. Christmas is a *national* holiday in the United States, and in many other nations. The traditions of gift-giving, carol-singing and related celebrations are deeply embedded in our culture, and I personally would not wish them away. But at the same time, the desire to have other religious holidays occurring in winter acknowledged in public space is understandable. It is not a “war on Christmas”. In such situations, good will and common sense should be exercised to maintain civic peace.

As for the sensitive issue of maintaining our distinctive religious traditions and still showing respect for others, I (again) invoke Bishop Krister Stendhal’s creative concept of **Holy Envy**: find some aspect of another’s faith that you admire, that enlarges your own understanding of divinity, but do not try to appropriate it; it doesn’t belong to you or to your tradition. This insight has freed me to deeply appreciate and find spiritual sustenance in the texts and traditions of other religions. It is a brilliant formula.

I believe the world needs our cooperation and our mutual efforts. I don’t have to name the problems; we all know them: increasing hostility on racial, national and ethnic grounds, sexual violence, growing economic disparity, ecological disasters. The example of Christians, Jews, Muslims and people of all faiths and none working together to combat these evils of our time could lift the spirits and courage of many despairing people in our world. We must look inward toward our own texts and teachings, and confront the sources of hostility towards others. We must look outward toward the immense challenges of extreme nationalism and racism. I draw from my own tradition, but in its name, I call upon all of us to be “a light unto the nations.”