Vital Role of Religion in the Calamitous World of Today

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By Jovan Kovačić

Jovan Kovačić is the co-Founder and president of East West Bridge, a member of the Executive Committee of the Trilateral Commission and chairperson of the Serbian National Group of the Trilateral Commission. A former international reporter, communications expert and policy advisor, Kovačić was educated in British, Serbian and US schools, and has a M.A. in communications and media management. He worked worldwide for decades as a war correspondent for CNN, ABC, NPR, BBC and other major media outlets. He ended his award-winning reporting career as a Reuter’s correspondent for ex-Yugoslavia covering several wars from Slovenia in 1991 to Kosovo in 1998. He joined the Office of the High Representative to Bosnia in 1998, as a political advisor in charge of reconstruction and negotiating the safe return of thousands of refugees and DPs. He also played an active role in the pro-democracy movement in Serbia.

Mr. President, Madame Chairperson, your Eminences, distinguished colleagues, dear friends,

It is truly a great pleasure, privilege and honor to speak in front of you today. The symbolism of the venue is not lost to us—this is Macedonia, which has been for millennia an inspiration and wellspring of great achievements in literature, philosophy, medicine, religion, esoterica and many other fields. Many great ideas have been born here and went to captivate the world and launch events which changed the face of history.

Is it not wonderful that we are discussing dialogue among religions and civilizations in Bitola, a city that derives its name from the Old Church Slavonic word wōúmnăb (obitěľ, meaning "monastery, cloister") as the city was formerly noted for its monastery.

This subject we are discussing over the weekend could not be more topical or important than it is now. So permit me just at the start to present to you some of my views on the subject,

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1 Speech at the Fourth World Conference on Dialogue Among Religions and Civilizations, Bitola, Macedonia, 2016.
like bullet points for the ensuing debate. The views are purely mine and if someone has an issue with them, then I apologize—I am solely to blame.

Throughout history, religion has been abused by rulers and now today’s politicians to achieve their political, financial or territorial ambitions. It’s been said that religion is the opium of the masses but permit me the audacity to amend this thought and say that in most cases, religion is a facilitator for the ruling class—a tool for political means and keeping subjects under control. But as far as the masses are concerned, without religion, they would be much poorer for the lack of it in the spiritual, philosophical, moral and societal sense. A religious void would be a disaster for mankind, a black hole in our conscience and system of social norms.

You will agree with me that despite all our dreams and aspirations and indeed devotion of millions of exemplary people to improve standards of living, health care, education, human, religious and all other rights, our planet seems to be a lot more dangerous and a twisted place than decades ago.

Modern globalization and internet have given us a huge boost—knowledge from across the globe is at our fingertips; countries thousands of miles apart are today figuratively and in many aspects, close neighbors. The butterfly effect has never been more evident than today. So, with all this huge knowledge at our disposal, why then aren’t we smarter, kinder to each other, why there is still bias, bigotry and cruelty in the world? Instead of being wiser, I sometimes think all this readily available information has made us only dumber.

There are 18 percent more hostilities today than in the same period last year which again recorded an 80 percent increase in terrorist acts than the previous year. The figures for this year are certainly going to be a lot worse and the East-West relations are in many ways at the all-time
low, on the brink of disaster. Some 200 people on the planet today enjoy riches bigger than the combined wealth of close half of the world’s population.

Economies are shaky, democracy is showing glaring signs of need for serious tweaking to meet the modern challenges, or perhaps plainly said, to mitigate the avarice and lack of compassion by the ruling few and cease being their instrument.

The Old World Order is being torn down while despite all the wisdom at our fingertips today, no one can truly say what and how will the new one look like. We have no genuine safeguards in place, and we are still looking at our foes, real or perceived, through outdated and distortive optics.

Even the EU system, the most advanced social order in the recorded history of mankind, an economically sound system shared by half a billion people is being challenged, not to use a more serious word, by some one million unarmed, cold, hungry and fretful refugees.

Are they treated well, can they quickly integrate, has the EU a ready-made and tailored solution to their problems or a working idea how to integrate them into the new society? The answer to each is, alas, a resounding no, despite all the best wishes. Compounding to the already huge problem is the fact that individual governments of EU countries are now breaking ranks with the adopted immigrant policies, such as they may be, and contributing to the cracks in EU’s monolith edifice.

The worst is yet to come as despite all the preparations by the EU, Frontex activity and millions of euros spent to protect borders, millions more are getting ready to come to Europe. Where will these people go? Logically, they will gravitate to the districts populated by their countrymen already living in Europe and hence those districts, for example—the council estates which in most part are simply ghettos—will only grow—as will the problems.
They will face fear of the unknown in a new environment, fear for their loved ones, how to make a living, whom to turn to for medical care under new secular circumstances, and suffer from traumas of their escape from war zones. They will face dilemmas on how best to pursue their worship and religious customs and rites, how to safeguard their already traumatized children. Will their new home country be good to them or not, will they be deported back to the horrors of war zones and atrocities?

Migrants bring significant economic and cultural benefits. Some newcomers are very successful in the labor market and enjoy positive relations with other residents. But there is substantial evidence that many face disadvantages on all the key indexes of integration: legal rights, education, employment, criminal justice, health, living conditions, and civic participation. Moreover, migrants and the second generation can be well integrated on one index (such as intermarriage), but not on others (such as high unemployment).

To make matters worse, the immigrants face inclusion and integration issues clouded over by alarmingly growing populism stemming from the fear of the unknown and selfishness—which not only makes the already difficult lives of the immigrants even worse, to say the least, but also poisons the home atmosphere and sows distrust and even hatred among the recipient population. Public resentment of migrants and fear of differences leads to discrimination, community tensions, and occasional violence. In addition, it has contributed to the steady rise in support for far-right political parties, which successfully exploit people's fears and resentments.

The fear of the unknown or fear of losing their jobs to newcomers who will work for less? A bit of both. On the other hand, an ominous 2013 poll by Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung alleges Islamic fundamentalism is widespread among European Moslems with the majority saying religious rules are more important than civil laws. I can only hope these
figures are exaggerated, but either way this does not sit well with the increasingly secular Europe.

This is where the religious leaders must step in. Imams and priests must assume the mantle of responsibility not just for their flock, but all people in their environment, and talk together and find ways of making the immigrants’ “landing” in Europe softer, and inclusion easier and effective. Both the Islamic and Christian clerics must work on the solution together, they must talk with each other, must become a vital cog in the solution and not stay on the sidelines, pursue their narrow agendas and hence remain a part of the problem. They are perhaps ideally suited today to reach across confessions and start a much-needed dialogue or discussion on how to end the hostilities and rebuild trust among faiths, and then pass on workable ideas to the local politicians to make necessary adjustment to immigrant policies. One does have to bear in mind that one people can never be truly happy if others are suffering, so it’s in their best interest to cooperate with one another.

It has been known to work in the past and even today—and permit me to use a wonderful example of religious tolerance, understanding, trust and cooperation, when stakes are very high: the keeper of the keys to the Basilica of the Holy Grave in Jerusalem, which involves six Christian churches known for their spectacular arguments, some of which account for great footage on YouTube, for more than 13 centuries is a Moslem family. This story obviously has several morals.

Furthermore, many in the West tend to think that fundamentalism as a concept is confined to Islam. It most certainly is not—it exists everywhere, in all societies and all religions. I sincerely have, perhaps a pipe dream, but a dream nevertheless, in which responsible religious leaders will take on the extremists in their respective societies. Simply put, even though it is the
task of security forces in Europe, for instance, to combat terrorism, who is better suited for the
task of uprooting it at the source than their own religious leaders? No one can do that better than
them. No one knows their flock’s problems better than them.

Because each extremist act, be it Moslem, Christian or whatever, brings shame and grief
to the rest of the vast majority of decent folks who have the right to pray and worship their God
as they should. Extremism shackles its own environment just as much as it wrecks havoc on
those whom it perceives as the infidel or enemy. Just look at Syria and Iraq today where
hundreds of thousands have died in a war with a pronounced religious component, albeit spurred
by geopolitical motives. Tens of millions of people have had their futures ruined, children left
with no prospects whatsoever. Just to illustrate what a world we live in today, allow me to point
out that 20,000 people, mostly infants from age one to five, die from starvation each and every
day, while at the same time, five billion dollars are spent that same day on armaments and
military needs. Need one to say anything more?

So, we have a colossal task ahead of us and it cannot wait. We must reach out to each
other and champion core values of mankind. Learn from one another and keep populists and
extremists at bay. It takes courage to take on the enemy but real heroism to take on one’s own.
Perseverance and commitment are the cornerstone of great deeds just as dialogue and
negotiations are quintessential to stability, peace and prosperity—always a much better
alternative to wars, unless you are an arms merchant.

Finally, we also must upgrade the word “tolerance.” Deep down, it does have a sinister
connotation. What we must now do is raise the bar and learn how to respect our mutual
differences, learn them and finally enjoy them because they bring diversity, new knowledge, new
vistas, they make us better and wiser people. This is not the question of “know thy enemy” but
instead “get to know your new friend better”. Once we get that into our heads, everything else will be much easier.

Thank you for your kind attention.