

Editorial

By
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The international gathering of the Conference of the Parties (COP26) on climate change organized by the United Nations in Glasgow, United Kingdom, is over. Some agreements were made but many climate justice campaigners, NGOs, civil society groups and 'green activists' remain dissatisfied with the outcome. Some of the big players on the world stage, such as China and Russia, both part of the UN's Security Council with veto powers did not even attend the conference. The young climate activists led by the Swedish woman, Greta Thunberg, were of the view that the Glasgow COP26 had brought them closer together and in greater solidarity to press their views on the climate emergency. The energy of these young people was a clear sign that the aging global leadership and their 'out of touch' reading would be made redundant unless they were ready for change. These young people asserted that theirs was the future and hence, that decisive policy measures should be in place without delay.

However, this international meeting has made it clear that there is an urgent need for a collaborative effort to counter any major crisis such as climate change. Other crises – such as the continuing situation of instability caused by Afghanistan's political situation and the spillover effects into neighboring states particularly Pakistan and Tajikistan, display other manifestations of how a society may be violent with no space for dialogue. Another crisis the increasing migration of people seeking safety and security, are major causes of concern. Also, the Caribbean Island of Haiti is back in crisis while Myanmar in Asia has again lost its regained democratic breathing space. These situations of instability and the threat of terror-related activity in many countries have resulted in a sense of despair. However, none of these issues can be resolved any longer without international cooperation and institutional support in the areas of economic and trade justice, non-discriminatory fiscal policies, the sharing of intelligence, mutually agreed border controls and without scrutiny of the live nexus between the thriving narcotic industry and terror networks with their affiliations to internationally linked underworld operations.

It is beyond the capacity of anyone to analyze and to classify any of these issues for the sake of the regional or national security of a country. However, national governments, states and institutions cannot turn a blind eye to any of these causes of concern. Moreover, the religious traditions of the world have a responsibility to bring the fundamentals of faith, belief and practice to bear on these issues as well. Indeed, world religions must be ready for more dialogue and cooperation among all religious traditions and for any changes to their world view that such dialogue may demand.

In the first article, Paul Rohan focuses on religious pluralism in the context of Sri Lanka. In his view, a true believer of any religion should accept and respect the God-experience and the religious practices of other religions. Religions have the capacity to bring about mutual respect, tolerance and cooperation among diverse ethnic groups and traditions. He quotes Pope Francis who describes the role of the religions in the world as "wombs of life, bearing the merciful love of God to a wounded and needy humanity; may they be doors of hope helping to penetrate the walls erected by pride and fear." Rohan emphasizes that extremist

interpretations of religion do not necessarily emanate from their core-teachings but from the deviant perspectives and culturally rooted customs of their practitioners.

Rohan argues that all religious traditions should embrace a spirituality of dialogue, which could transform the traditional understanding of a religion from being just a link between God and human beings to becoming an interlocutor among various religious traditions. The word *dialogue* derives from the Latin word *dia+logos* = *to discuss* or *to reason through*. Hence, the *dialogue of religions* has the capacity to make a contribution to dealing with the issues faced by the modern world. While interfaith dialogue will not produce miracles nor generate quick results, such dialogue provides a practical response to the issues facing the modern world.

The second article, by Muhammad Akram Rana, also finds a role for religion in the face of social issues. The writer argues that there is an affinity between religion and the sustainability of the environment. In his view, Islam possesses strong environmental principles and teaches that human beings have been appointed to act as 'trustees of the earth,' which demands that they seek social order and economic wellbeing in society. Moreover, the environment, society and the economy should not be seen as separate entities in relation to the concept of sustainability but rather as interconnected entities. In fact, environmental sustainability can be understood only in terms of the relationship between nature and human beings, who must not exploit the environment but develop mutually enriching relations with it. In short, the idea that human beings are, in some sense, superior to nature is no longer tenable. The writer takes Pakistan as a case study for his detailed analysis of the sustainability of the environment.

In the third article, Victor Edwin discusses the role of religion in society by examining the thought of two Muslim scholars, who both invite people to live as co-citizens and co-humans in the modern world, namely, Mohammed Talbi (Tunisia) and Abul Kalam Azad (India). This article was first delivered as a paper at the international conference on *Religious Pluralism and World Peace* (Minhaj University Lahore, 2017). The writer argues that these two Muslim scholars are particularly significant in the world context that has developed since 9/11 because people have begun to question whether Muslims can coexist with people of other faiths and from different cultural traditions. In contrast to *Salafism* and *Wahhabism*, which have reduced the secular space that Muslims had developed over the centuries, Abul Kalam Azad and Mohammed Talbi stress the positive value of plurality, which they find in the Qur'an. The two scholars assert, says Edwin, that acceptance of religious pluralism is necessary to promote good relations between Muslims and people of other faith traditions in democratic societies. The heritage of Islam and the textual dynamism that the two scholars find in the Qur'an makes it possible for Muslims to engage with diverse traditions and religions in the struggle for peace and justice in society.

Moreover, in the fourth article Qasim Khan also highlights the need for interaction and dialogue among different groups in society. This article, however, presents a new perspective on the theme of dialogue by insisting on the need to interact with those who do not share a theistic perspective on religion. Atheism, which is either a denial of the existence of God or the complete abandonment of the construct of theism, has gradually evolved into a sociopolitical force championed by atheist intellectuals such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett. These atheists deserve our serious attention because they present rational arguments for the absurdity of God-talk. The writer discusses their views in a critical but respectful way.

Qasim Khan argues that reason and intellectual discourse can present some common ground between religious traditions and modern atheists and says that atheism is the outcome of a superficial comprehension of religion. Whereas theism places a greater emphasis on scripture or revealed knowledge, atheism emphasizes learned knowledge. Interestingly, the writer concludes that it is possible to live a life of religious devotion by combining learned knowledge with the practice of religion.

In the final article, Ajith Wellington develops what all the earlier articles have said about the contribution of the religions to the welfare of society by stating clearly that society should be governed by those who love virtue, those who love humanity and by those whose sole concern is the welfare of the entire people. As Plato states in his *Republic*, true justice is concerned with the common good of the whole political community. True justice fosters respect, fraternity, liberty and equality. In contrast, injustice, which is not concerned with the common good of the whole community, causes war, hatred and anger. The writer argues that social democracy fosters true justice, which recognizes the right and duty of every human being to participate in the life of the community. Hence, social democracy is arguably the best political system for any society. Despite its shortcomings and limitations, social democracy is better than government by a bureaucratic caste system in which the dictatorship of a hereditary aristocracy and military elite exercises complete control.

The final article further highlights the importance of honesty in every form of dialogue and political activity. The truth must be spoken and should never be betrayed. Socrates was ready to give his life rather than to take part in dishonesty and political corruption. In the writer's view, politicians today spend their energy and time not on what they can do to enhance the quality of life of their people but on how to outdo their political rivals. Unlike Socrates, who said that he was not going to change his behavior, not even if he had to die a hundred deaths, our politicians change their conduct and their opinions to suit their own advantage. Socrates said that politicians should go about trying to persuade the young and the old to make their first concern neither their bodies nor their possessions but the greater welfare of the entire human community.

All the articles in this edition invite our readers to discuss the role of religion in society from varying perspectives. The articles all stress the need for the kind of dialogue and cooperation that was missing at the COP26 in Glasgow this autumn on climate change. The agonizing stories of loss and despair from Myanmar and Haiti and from the people in Afghanistan must also be heard. Harmonious relations between different societies and religions will come about only when men and women from different religious beliefs and those with no religious beliefs at all (the so-called atheists and humanists) learn to sit together and listen to one another, failing which religion and its strong appeal for the public good will be destroyed by mindless religious extremism and the cruel treatment of fellow human beings. The notion of religious literacy demands such intelligent listening and cooperation for the benefit of the whole society. ■