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THE POPE IN PALESTINE AND ISRAEL - JOINING THE PRAYER

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In late last May the Pope paid a visit to the Palestinian Authority and Israel. He also invited both presidents, Mahmud Abbas and Shimon Peres, to pray together in Rome, which they did on June the 8th. It all went well. The Pope is a great person, full of charm and good intentions. Abbas and Peres represent the best of their respective peoples. They both radiate openness and rationality. For the Palestinians the visit was significant as another voice of global importance calling for the establishment of a Palestinian state. For the Jewish people of Israel it was significant as yet another call for a two-state solution, as well as another step towards the normalization of Jewish-Christian relations, another unfinished story. All three personalities made good speeches, and their praying together for peace had the air of goodwill and sincerity. But, was it all something more than a side episode?

A good prayer can surely cause no damage. But, in my opinion, religiosity, as a dialogue with ancient legacies, traditions and norms, should hardly be called to help in politics. Peres is a child of modern Jewish secular nationalism, Zionism. Abbas is a leader of modern, secular Palestinian nationalism, the PLO version. Both think in terms of statehood, citizenship, human rights, and future oriented societies, knowledge, economy. In a way they

do think in similar terms. Together, ideally, they could work out some practical compromise, some interim agreement perhaps. Yet, all previous dialogues between the two modern, secular nationalist movements failed settling the core issues. Still, the hope is in such a dialogue.

In the last four decades, unfortunately, political-religious ideologies entered, or re-entered the scene. In the Israeli-Jewish side, old messianic tendencies surfaced and even took the lead in settling the 1967 occupied territories, with the purpose of reviving biblical concepts regarding the Land of Israel. The settlers and their supporters, still a numerical minority but strong enough to have their way, are there to deny partition of the land. Many of them do so in the name of their religious interpretation of politics.

In the Arab world at large – the Palestinians no exception – political Islam has been reintroduced in the 1970s at the expense of the secular Arabism. Political Islam led the way in protesting against corruption and against dictatorship in the Arab countries. It worked for the re-entrance of Iran and of Turkey to the all-Middle Eastern scene, further complicating it. Political Islam undermined modern state structures and contributed to the current chaos in the region. Political Islam, to distinguish



from modern Islam which goes together with comprehensive modernization, is behind much of the disastrous situation in many Arab countries. Today, the main conflicts in the Middle East are between Sunnis and Shi'is, and between modern nationalists and religious extremists. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, painful in itself, is a mere side-show, hardly the pivotal problem.

History, is what happens when planned otherwise. One can never know when it starts taking a new direction. It often works in paradoxical ways. I hardly believe that a common prayer, turning to God in the name of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, can be a turning point for the better. But I surely do hope so. For the purpose of co-existence, peace and pluralism, I myself do humbly join the prayer.