

From Harmony to Peace

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Address to “World Interfaith Harmony Week”

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When I mentioned to a friend that I had been invited to speak at a World Interfaith Harmony Week event, he responded: "What planet is that on!" Let us not underestimate the cynicism that greets efforts to bring peoples together in peace.

It is not cynicism we should feel at this moment but great hope, for the world is struggling to find a higher level of civilization. Some see only turmoil, exploitation, hate and the forces of division, but I see the peoples of the world forging a new path forward through the rule of law, the rejection of violence, and the rediscovery of the authentic spirit of religion. The awakening of a global conscience is driving us forward to a world of greater care and mutual respect. True, violence, war and greed still assault us. But humanity, now joined together by the diverse communications, finance and trade elements of globalization, is entering a new moment when the bright light of peace beckons the human family as never before.

Our celebration today is a sign of this progress. World Interfaith Harmony Week came about through a resolution unanimously adopted at the United Nations last September. It was the idea of King Abdullah of Jordan and presented to the U.N. General Assembly by Prince Ghazi, who challenged religions to become a great new foundation for world peace.

Much good work has already been done, notably by the Christian-Muslim Forum, sponsored by A Common Word, which has become the world's leading interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Similarly, the Alliance of Civilizations, an initiative sponsored by the

governments of Spain and Turkey, works with people of all religions and cultures to counter the forces that fuel polarization and extremism. This work has been praised by U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for building support for U.N. efforts for peace.

Prince Ghazi cited the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) as a seminal moment in opening a new era of understanding. The Council's Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions affirmed the Catholic Church's respect for the spiritual, moral and cultural values of other religions. The spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is so great, the Council said, that the Church "deplores the hatred, persecutions and displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews at any time and from any place." The Council went on: "Upon the Muslims too, the Church looks with esteem. They adore one God, living and enduring, merciful and all powerful, Maker of heaven and earth and Speaker to people. They strive to submit wholeheartedly even to His inscrutable decrees, just as did Abraham, with whom the Islamic faith is pleased to associate itself."

As a Christian, I find comfort in the words of the Prophet Mohammed, who said: "None of you has faith [in God] until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself." It is in this spirit that I appeal for an end to the persecution and even murder of Christians in their churches by extremists in Iraq and other places where Christians are a minority.

Sadly, as Prince Ghazi noted, the world is rife with religious tensions, which sometimes erupt into communal violence. Demonizing of the other predisposes public opinion to support war against peoples of other religions. A 2008 Gallup Poll showed that 53 percent of

Westerners have “unfavourable” or “very unfavourable” opinions of Muslims and 30 percent of Muslims hold negative views of Christians. Moreover, the forces inciting inter-religious tensions (notably religious fundamentalists of various kinds) seem more motivated, have more money and garner more publicity than the positive work done by various interfaith initiatives.

The healing balm of interfaith dialogue is impeded because it is still stumbling over what divides Judaism, Christianity and Islam rather than building on what unites the three great Abrahmic faiths: love of God and love of neighbour. In fact, all faiths have a core teaching: do not do to others what you don't want done to you. This teaching is the basis of peace in the world. Peace among religions is a requisite for peace among nations. Genuine, respectful dialogue must now be taken up by people of faith all over the world.

This is where the word “harmony” can play such an important role in lifting our vision. “Harmony” should be our immediate goal, for it goes beyond tolerance and acceptance. The Confucian concept of “harmony” suggests not only peace but “beautiful and dynamic interaction between different elements within a whole.” We speak of musical notes presenting a harmonious effect. In interfaith dialogue, we should seek the inter-weaving of different accounts into a single narrative in an atmosphere of calm.

Harmony does not mean limpness, nor does it cover up theological differences. Rather, it seeks to bind men and women of faith into a recognition that the love of God and neighbour we profess must

propel us to proclaim, again and again, that non-violence is the only way to peace. This is not weakness, it is strength. It takes courage to rise up above denominationalism and, with the full force of the teaching of love and reciprocity that underscores all religions, speak out to build the conditions for peace. Religion cannot become the state, but it must inspire the state. It must do this not through triumphalism, but through humility – acknowledging its responsibility for many conflicts of the past and expressing its determination now to play a role in achieving peace and social justice.

The first step in playing this role is for religions to come together, not to submerge their identities but to commonly affirm the meaning of life at a time when humanity has acquired the power of total extinction. This role must go beyond mere admonitions of tolerance. The goal must be much more than overcoming religious prejudice. The crisis of our time requires religions to speak to the conscience of humanity with a message of unity. We have one destiny. We live or die together in the struggle for peace. All humanity – with its differences of race, religion and culture – must recognize the common danger to life and use this crisis to ascend to a higher level of civilization. That is the challenge the World Interfaith Harmony Week presents to us.

The world is passing through a moment of both crisis and opportunity. The people of Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, Yemen and other countries of the Middle East are making it clear that the moment for self-determination and an end to political oppression has come. This yearning for human rights in all their dimensions – economic and social

as well as civil and political – is not confined to the Middle East. It exists everywhere as people increasingly feel the yoke of disastrous political policies that afford the super-rich the lion's share of the earth's resources while depriving the world's youth of employment in the production of goods and services for all. Governments increasingly invest in military arms in an illusory search for peace when they should be expanding investments in the developments of peoples. All this cries out for justice. This is a profound moral problem religion must address.

A new opportunity for the leaders of the world's major faiths to raise their voice in harmony on behalf of the dispossessed and powerless will occur next October. Pope Benedict XVI has invited the leaders of other world religions to join him in Assisi to “solemnly renew the commitment of believers of every religion to live their own religious faith as a service in the cause of peace.” This pilgrimage will commemorate the 25th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's similar journey to Assisi to pray with world religious leaders for peace.

Again, there will be an opportunity for Christians, Jews and Muslims and leaders of other faiths to pray together and proclaim their conviction that violence and terrorism are incompatible with the authentic spirit of religion, that the right of everyone to live a decent life in accordance with their own cultural identity must be upheld, and that leaders of all nations have a duty to promote policies leading to a world of solidarity and peace based on justice.

This effort should not be confined to Assisi. All over the world, people of good faith can join in with their own events. Here in our own

community, the Edmonton Interfaith Centre for Education & Action is well organized and capable of drawing representatives of all faiths to an event here in our midst prior to Assisi, so that we too can lift up, in harmony, our combined cry for peace with justice. We say often that we want our politicians to work in “harmony.” Here is our chance, as people of faith, to show the way by the “harmony” of our actions.