

**God and the Culture of Peace:
A Theology of the Street**

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It is an honour and a challenge for a politician to speak in such a distinguished theological setting. The Regis College outreach is truly global, ecumenical and interfaith, so perhaps there is room here for a theology of the street. I have never thought that politician and theology are oxymorons, for surely the study of the nature of God can be done from the public arena. I do not believe that God created the world in order for it to be blown up by nuclear weapons, sullied by environmental degradation, or huge numbers of its inhabitants denied the fundamental requisites of human life and dignity. The God of my vision inspires me to seek social justice and the peaceful resolution of conflict. And so I have toiled for much of my life in one political forum or another in the belief that God's plan for creation must become our own work here on earth. When Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers..." he enabled me to feel a union with God, and it is in that spirit that I dare to come before you tonight with my own theology of the street.

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Alliance of Civilizations and A Common Word

When Muslim terrorists bombed Madrid trains in 2004, killing 191 people, the Spanish Prime Minister, Rodriguez Zapatero, decided that the response this time must not take the route of vengeance which followed the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington. He formed a partnership with the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Erdogan, and together they proposed an "alliance of civilizations" project as an international response to the terrorist attack. Rather than a wall of hatred between the Western and Arab and Western worlds leading to a "clash of civilizations," the "alliance of

civilizations” would reaffirm the increasing interdependence of all societies in the areas of economics, finance, security, culture, environment and health. The central aim of the alliance would be to strengthen diversity so that it becomes a source of enrichment and not a threat.

The project took the form of a United Nations High-level Group, headed by Federico Mayor, the former head of UNESCO, and included the Nobel laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the religious historian Karen Armstrong, and former Iran president Mohamed Khatani. The Group found that humanity will achieve progress not by ignoring or denying our differences but by acknowledging them openly and celebrating our diversity. They made the point that these differences are not primarily religious or cultural but political. The Alliance of Civilizations, now a permanent body in the U.N. system, runs a wide range of programs in education, youth opportunities, help for migrants, and combating media stereotyping. In January 2008, I attended the First Alliance of Civilizations Forum in Madrid, where 1,000 political, religious, corporate and civil society leaders conducted stimulating dialogues on reducing polarization between nations and launched joint initiatives to promote cross-cultural understanding globally.

In 2007, 138 Muslim scholars wrote a public letter to Christian leaders affirming the common ground of love of God and love of neighbor that Muslims and Christians stand on. Some 300 Christian leaders responded with enthusiasm. An organization, “A Common Word,” was formed and a series of inter-faith meetings started. Subsequently, Pope Benedict XVI received the Muslim delegation and launched workshops in the Vatican. A joint statement said that believers “are called to be instruments of love and

harmony...renouncing any oppression, aggressive violence and terrorism, especially that committed in the name of religion, and upholding the principle of justice for all.”

I have cited these two developments – Alliance of Civilizations and A Common Word – to illustrate at least two reasons for my hope that the maturation of civilization as a whole can lead to a more enlightened and peaceful world. The power of these two developments lies in the potential to transform the world from exclusive societies living independently of one another to inclusive societies comprising diverse peoples. “Different” people are no longer confined to distant lands. “Different” people are all around us. Both movements are manifestations of a rising global conscience that characterizes modern times.

The Awakening of a ‘Global Conscience’

The headlines of the day to the contrary notwithstanding, something is happening that is actually lifting up humanity. An awakening of concern about how we humans treat one another and the planet is taking place. A new view of the human being, you and me, is coming into focus in the development of public policy. A new caring for the wholeness of life is being defined. Humanity is learning to understand all our human relationships, our relationship with the Earth, and how to govern for the common good. The groundwork for a culture of peace is being laid. This is the stirring of a global conscience.

Many people are calling for a new global ethic to make the world a more human place. The point I want to make at the outset is that a new ethic is actually being formulated. From instances close to home –

campaigns to stop drinking and driving, new societal concern for people with mental and physical disabilities – to international civil society movements – Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Grameen Bank – there are mounting displays of evidence of the march of humanity forward.

Wait a minute, many of you may be saying. Wars are still being fought. Poverty is rampant throughout the developing countries. The air and waters are being despoiled. The most egregious violations of human rights are taking place. Greed and corruption continue to infect political processes. How can I talk about this new maturation of civilization when we are still being dragged down by the same old problems?

I concede that the paradoxes of globalization do impede vision. We have to be able to see past the problems of the day to observe a shift in human thinking. The very existence of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is an expression of global conscience. It is filled with an uplifting of humanity. It has spawned covenants on civil and political rights and economic and social rights of all peoples. Numerous commissions have explored how these rights can be fully implemented. The development of thinking about humanity fostered by the United Nations, not exclusively of course, reveals that the old thinking – conscience as personal behaviour religiously guided – is far too limiting for what is actually happening in the modern world.

The old questions of personal conduct to determine a moral life have been augmented with new questions about the well-being of the citizens of the planet and of the planet itself. It used to be that the only thing we

thought much about was ourselves and maybe our relationship with those we came into contact with on a daily basis. But, with science and technology and a new understanding of the universal inherency of human rights, an integration of humanity is occurring. Not only do we know one another across what used to be the great divides, we further know that we need one another for common survival. There is a new caring for the human condition. This is the awakening of a “global conscience.”

This “global conscience” is thrusting up new, ever more stark, questions:

- Why is there so much starvation when there is so much food in the world?
- Why are we polluting the atmosphere and waters when we have the technology to avoid this?
- Why do we tolerate the existence of nuclear weapons, which threaten to destroy the processes of life?
- Why do we have the United Nations and then refuse to empower it to stop wars and end starvation?

The answers to these questions are not yet sufficiently strong to overcome an unjust world economy, world disorder and the undermining of human rights and the rule of law. Perhaps the world will still have to endure yet more wars, more religious extremism, and a wave of nuclear proliferation. But the very forces of nature, business, communications, and world politics are building up a single society. The chief characteristics of this society are its common humanity and the need for a common law.

Development of a Culture of Peace

These ideas are captured in the documentation outlining the characteristics of a culture of peace. I use the word “documentation” advisedly, for a great deal of work has already been done at the United Nations to define and promote a culture of peace based on the premise that human beings do not emerge from the womb as violent creatures but are socialized to violence through the seemingly perpetual culture of war. A culture of peace is an approach to life that seeks to transform the cultural tendencies toward war and violence into a culture where dialogue, respect, and fairness govern social relations.

UNESCO pioneered these ideas and, in 1999, the U.N. General Assembly adopted a Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace. Nobel Peace laureates distilled the ideas into a set of guidelines:

- **Respect all life.** Respect the life and dignity of each human being without discrimination or prejudice.
- **Reject violence.** Practice active non-violence, rejecting violence in all its forms: physical, sexual, psychological, economical, and social.
- **Share with others.** Share my time and material resources in a spirit of generosity to put an end to exclusion and injustice.
- **Listen to understand.** Defend freedom of expression and cultural diversity, giving preference always to dialogue and listening without engaging in fanaticism, defamation, and the rejection of others.
- **Preserve the planet.** Promote responsible consumer behaviour.

- **Rediscover solidarity.** Contribute to the development of our community, with the full participation of women and respect for democratic principles.

The year 2000 was designated the International Year for the Culture of Peace, and the NGO-UNESCO Liaison Committee, working in 100 countries, carried out wide-ranging projects, including entertainment, workshops, sporting events, festivals, and Internet sites to promote the year. This surge of activity culminated in a General Assembly resolution designating 2001-2010 the International Decade a Culture of Peace and Non-violence for the Children of the World. No sooner had the special decade begun when the terrorists of 9/11 struck. The resurgence of militarism drove the activities of a culture of peace into the shadows.

Instead of peace, the first decade of the 21st century has brought us the “war on terrorism,” leading to discouragement in the peace movement and skepticism in the public generally. Resilience is not the least of the qualities needed to work for peace. Those great figures – Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Oscar Romero – who laid the foundation stones for a culture of peace would not have been deterred by the forces of terrorism. They never yielded from their principles of non-violence and neither should we.

The Human Right to Peace

It is not only a culture of peace that we should aspire to but recognition of the human right to peace. Again, the U.N. has led the way in declaring, a quarter of a century ago, “The peoples of our planet have a

sacred right to peace.” Advocates hold that the human right to peace is already a component of developing international law. The major powers have not been in favour of any circumscription of their power to make war as they see fit, so not much has been heard of this U.N. initiative. Nonetheless, the subject of the human right to peace has clearly entered circles of discussion at the U.N., academic and religious settings. The millions who marched in protest against the looming Iraq war in 2003 expressed their awakened feelings against using war as an instrument of peace. Never before had this happened on such a grand scale prior to a war actually happening.

This is a signal moment because a full discussion of the human right to peace puts a new spotlight on the age-old question of the abolition of war itself. The old “just war” theory must, in my view, be completely reassessed to take account of two major modern developments: the catastrophic effects of nuclear weapons and United Nations’ mechanisms for mediation to resolve disputes. In the new era of weapons of mass destruction, the viability of war as a legal means to resolve disputes is clearly over. War today can lead to the obliteration of humanity. Unfortunately, the world community, held in check by the forces of the culture of war, principally the military-industrial complex, is a long way from outlawing war. The debate on the human right to peace, therefore, is a step forward. As it is pursued, it will force the political system to face up to its responsibility to mitigate the worst effects of war as is now happening in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The still-young 21st century has already made a profound discovery: military force cannot bring security. Certainly, the “war on terror” has

proven to be grossly miscalculated as a way to deal with terrorists or insurgents. Though the lesson that war is not the way to peace is proving to be very hard to learn, more people are learning it. Those who work to build the conditions for peace still have a hard time being heard, yet there is evidence of the diminishment of the culture of war. The number of armed conflicts in the world is declining. And the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission reported in 2006 that “while people will always have their ideological and national differences, the vast majority of humanity appears to be seeking the benefits of an increasingly interdependent world and is not rallying to the idea of an inevitable clash of civilizations.”

When the leaders of the world assembled at the U.N. in 2005 to commemorate the organization’s 60th anniversary, they issued a declaration showing how global conscience has taken hold:

Acknowledging the diversity of the world, we recognize that all cultures and civilizations contribute to the enrichment of humankind. We acknowledge the respect and understanding for religious and cultural diversity throughout the world. In order to promote international peace and security, we commit ourselves to advancing human welfare, freedom and progress everywhere, as well as to encouraging tolerance, respect, dialogue and cooperation among different cultures, civilizations and peoples.

They pledged to work together for a collective security system based on development, peace, security, and human rights. Of course, actually doing all this would require another step forward in political leadership. But the fact that the leaders were able even to agree that sustainable development and human rights are integral parts of the quest for security is

a remarkable testimony to human advancement. How to integrate these ideals into the messy business of state sovereignty remains a challenge.

Weapons and Starvation

For, despite their words, the political leaders of the world tolerate and condone shocking evidence of misplaced priorities. Global military expenditure last year reached \$1.46 trillion, a 45 percent increase in the past decade. The World Food Programme reports that food aid is at a 20-year low and this year the number of critically hungry people will, for the first time, exceed one billion people. I am thinking particularly of Bangladesh, a country I have visited several times and written about, and which is now trying to cope with millions of impoverished people barely sustaining a hand-to-mouth existence. Food prices doubled last year after the country's grain production was devastated by flooding and a catastrophic cyclone, pushing an extra 7.5 million people below the poverty line. In Bangladesh, the daily grind of existence assaults the senses; and yet I found evidence that, despite the enormity of its problems, the country is capable of moving ahead and needs but the help of the international political system and widening circles of humanity to care about these suffering people.

Global spending on weapons and the infrastructure of war is at an all-time high and one-sixth the population of the world lives on the brink of starvation. How is this possible at a time when we consider ourselves globally enlightened and there is a rising global conscience? The answer, I believe, is that the political systems have not yet come to grips with the crisis of humanity, caught at this juncture of history between growing aspirations for human rights and reliance on weapons of mass destruction as

the basis for power. Human rights for all and the proliferation of nuclear weapons are absolutely incompatible, but the rich and powerful appear not to have yet recognized this.

I am outraged at the political duplicity of the powerful, who speak of equality and peace but rely on military means to force their will. I am critical of the hypocrisies that justify a political and economic system that spends countless sums on wars but cannot feed and educate every child in the world. Merely railing against injustice does not accomplish much. But what accomplishes even less is closing our eyes to the massive discrepancies and assuming that the culture of war is inevitable. Action is urgently needed.

Both Moral and Existential

We are strengthened by another distinguishing feature of our time: morality and pragmatism have intersected. What we have long known we *should* do for our brothers and sisters on the planet, we now know we *must* do to ensure our very survival. Humanity has no other option. The two over-arching issues of the 21st century – the abolition of nuclear weapons and ending global warming – are profoundly moral and existential problems. It is not news that moral teaching emphasizes the core values of respect for life, liberty, justice, and equity; mutual respect; and personal integrity. What is news is that technology has brought us to the point where we all stand on one planet, breathe the same air, are affected by one another's problems, and possess the power to annihilate each other. The physical integrity of all human life today demands public policies that enhance, not diminish, life. The common good requires policies that

promote sustainable and socially equitable development and peace in all regions of the globe.

The gathering global conscience points to a world that is human-centered and genuinely democratic – a world that builds and protects peace, equality, justice and development; a world where human security, as envisioned in the principles of the U.N. Charter, replaces armaments, violent conflict and wars; a world where everyone lives in a clean environment with a fair distribution of the earth's resources, and where human rights are protected by a body of international law. The agenda I have just outlined is precisely what the People's Millennium Forum, held at the U.N. in 2000, called for. It was a forerunner to the Millennium Development Goals adopted later that year by governments. Only a few weeks ago, 1,300 representatives of 340 non-governmental organizations in 55 countries gathered in Mexico and issued a powerful statement urging governments to redirect arms expenditures towards more productive and socially responsible alternatives that could help to diminish the world's rich-poor divide and in turn increase security.

The global conscience that is now identified in every civilization will help to move humanity forward. By moving forward, I mean reaching the day when it becomes cultural, not counter-cultural, to stand in the public square and demand an end to war, an end to nuclear weapons and an end to massive poverty, and demand that the full weight of government policies and finances be directed to building the conditions for peace. I repeat: these thoughts are not just wishful thinking; they are firmly implanted in the minds of millions of people who work actively in diverse civil society movements around the world.

“A True World Political Authority”

It is the job of governments to implement policies that will lead to this kind of world. I firmly subscribe to what Pope John XXIII said in his masterful encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, “The attainment of the common good is the sole reason for the existence of civil authorities.” It was this powerful encyclical, addressed to all humanity, that provided a roadmap for peace. The encyclical foreshadowed the Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, which elaborated on the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of people everywhere. Pope John’s words fairly ring out with a call to action. People have “the right to live,” he said. They have “the right to bodily integrity...to food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest and social services.” People are living in the grip of constant war and violence. “Nuclear weapons must be banned.” “True and lasting peace among nations cannot consist in the possession of an equal supply of armaments but only in mutual trust.” “In this age which boasts of its atomic power, it no longer makes sense to maintain that war is a fit instrument with which to repair the violence of justice.” The United Nations must “adapt its structure and methods of operation to the magnitude and nobility of its tasks.”

The social teaching of the Church, from Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* onwards, has always insisted that authentic human development must be based on the wholeness of the human person. The latest pronouncement on this theme, Benedict XVI’s *Caritas in Veritate*, urges aggressive government action to construct a just world economic order. “There is urgent need for a true world political authority,” the Pope wrote. This is sorely needed, he said, to promote international cooperation, manage the

global economy, achieve integral and timely disarmament, food security and peace, protect the environment and regulate migration.

Several popes, particularly Leo XIII, John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI, have projected their vision for humanity onto the world stage and in so doing have contributed significantly to raising the new global conscience. The very words -- “Human beings are at the centre of concerns” – stated in the first principle of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development of 1992 and repeated often thereafter in U.N. documents reveal how the political structures are gradually being imbued with a recognition of the dignity of the human being.

Who is this human being who is supposed to be at the centre of concerns? Where did this person come from? Why is it important that he or she not be subjected to inhuman degradation or blown out of existence? The world is still secular, but it now seems more open to considering that there is indeed a fundamental relationship between God and the created universe, and thus public policies must be constructed not for the benefit of systems but people. The world struggles, lurches, stumbles but *is* moving forward to find ways to protect and uphold the rights of each human being. This statement could not have been made in any preceding century of humanity.

God’s Work Here on Earth

Today, all religions, in a spirit of humility and service, should, with a united voice, loudly proclaim their support for the U.N. global strategies of disarmament, development, equity, and justice – which are the basis for the culture of peace. Religions should remember that here on Earth, we have

the responsibility to continue and protect God's plan of creation. The preservation of the planet must be assured as a first step in the expression of our love for God. Religions will not lose by joining enthusiastically with secular humanists in the promotion of a global ethic that centres on the well-being of humanity. On the contrary, religions will thus manifest their deep concern for the application of the social justice principles embodied in the Golden Rule. Religions will then truly be in the service of God.

It does not seem to me that a global ethic to solidify the culture of peace can be achieved by either secular humanists or the religions talking only among themselves. It will take an enormous push by the combined forces of civil society. Religions have a duty to work alongside the representatives of politics, business and the financial world to foster the recognition that a global ethic is necessary for the survival of the planet. Hans Kung has said that it has become increasingly clear to him in recent years that the one world in which we live has a chance for survival only if there is no longer any room in it for spheres of differing, contradictory and even antagonistic ethics. "This one world needs one basic ethic. This one world society certainly does not need a unitary religion and a unitary ideology, but it does need some norms, values, ideals and goals to bring it together and to be binding on it."

Like Kung, although I have a home in my own church, I feel responsible towards all churches and religions: the unity of the churches and peace among all religions. It will take more than a few harmonious interfaith dialogues between Christians, Muslims and Jews to overcome the real source of religious divisions in the world today. Those divisions lie in the attitude of superiority and exclusiveness in which the differences of

“the other” are highlighted rather than the commonalities of all, irrespective of race or religion. In a world that is moving, however haltingly, towards the values of a universal civilization, the individualistic autonomy of religions holds back the blossoming of what could be their greatest achievement: that all may be one under God. The credibility of religion increasingly depends on putting more stress on what unites followers and less on what divides them. Dialogue – genuine, respectful conversations motivated by a common desire to serve humanity – is now critical.

The dialogue now fostered by the Alliance of Civilizations and A Common Word makes the point that humanity has shared a set of common values over centuries and those who communicate across the cultural divides are more likely to see diversity as a strength and celebrate it as a gift. Dialogue opens the way to the reconciliation of peoples.

Leaders Unafraid of Reconciliation

Reconciliation after warfare or other forms of conflict is a colossal undertaking. Do our institutions have the capacity to appeal to the heart and soul of those who have to take the first step towards reconciliation? Denial of reconciliation may lead us unconsciously into a perpetual state of hatred, if not a perpetual state of war. Reconciliation is dangerous; charismatic leaders have been assassinated because they tried to cross the divide. Nonetheless, reconciliation, and the refusal to believe that vengeance is justice, may well be the cutting edge of a social ethic yet to come. The greatest courage is not to kill the one who stands across the divide, but to look for another way, one that perhaps we have never tried before. The so-called “courage of might” clearly may hide a weakness of mind, and we

must look for new leaders unafraid to be in the vanguard of reconciliation. Reconciliation is not for the weak of heart, but rather for those who are prepared to search for it. Reconciliation is the route towards establishing a global ethic.

Numerous efforts, secularly based, are now underway to establish ethical modes of conduct. The Earth Charter, a “people’s document” prepared by a coalition of nongovernmental organizations, presents a set of ethics and principles to guide humanity toward ways of living that do not deplete the Earth’s resources and damage its ability to sustain life. Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland and former U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, has begun the “Ethical Globalization Initiative.” This is an effort to bridge existing ideological barriers between different perspectives on human rights norms; the integration of human rights into economic and social policies affecting globalization is a chief goal. The phenomenon of globalization, so much talked about today, cries out for ethical norms.

If religions do not become more prominently associated with this 21st century struggle of humanity to find ways to live together in one world, then religions will find themselves even more marginalized from the decision-making processes. Religions must change their present attitude of waiting for the world to come to them. Religions must enter – perhaps re-enter – the modern world in a humble and cooperative mode. They must now reach out to make a loving contact and help to heal a suffering humanity. The organization Religions for Peace, now advancing a new “United Nations Decade for Inter-religious and Inter-cultural Dialogue, Understanding and

Cooperation for Peace,” gives us hope that dialogue and reconciliation are achievable goals.

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For me, a theology of the street is all about the global conscience, a way to reach out for something greater than myself. Working on the human security agenda -- nuclear disarmament, sustainable development, protection of the environment and advancing human rights -- is the way I relate to God, the way I find Him, the way I think I understand better His plan for creation. He has left us free to choose creativity or chaos. My theology of the street is not just about God and me; it is about God and the world. I dare to say that I know God better because I see Him in my political struggle for justice on His planet.