

# **Healing a Suffering Humanity**

**Opening Address by Hon. Douglas Roche, O.C.  
Chairman, John Humphrey Centre Conference**

**“Building World Peace:  
The Role of Religious and Human Rights”**

**Edmonton, October 20, 2006**

We have assembled at this timely conference from many streams of life: Aboriginal, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and other faiths. Our hearts are heavy with the weight of war. Our spirits yearn for release from the violence that afflicts our age. Our message to our own community, to our country, to our world is: Peace. Peace be with you. We say again with Isaiah: “Peace, peace to the far and near, says the Lord, and I will heal them” (Isaiah 57:19).

Though we have come to speak of peace, we recognize that wars are still being fought and violence still being perpetrated. More wars with nuclear weapons and space weapons are envisioned. Poverty is rampant throughout the developing countries. The air and waters are being

despoiled. The most egregious violations of human rights are taking place. These are the many forms of violence, and they continue to afflict great numbers of humankind.

Since the beginning of history, human beings have been at war with one another, often under the pretext of religion, ideology or ethnicity. Today, we are confronted with the problem of international terrorism, which misuses religious ideas for perverse ideological purposes, kills innocent people indiscriminately, and spreads fear and horror throughout the world.

Let us, at the outset, categorically reject the exploitation, abuse and misuse of religion as justification for hate, oppression and terrorism. Let us proclaim that God is a name of peace and cannot be used as an argument for killing innocent people. Let us affirm that no religion has been founded on violence or intolerance.

All religions value the sanctity of human life and teach the essence of the culture of peace: Do not do unto others what you do not want done to you.

- Judaism asks that we value the beauty and joy of human existence.
- Christianity says that we should love our neighbour as ourself.
- Islam declares that killing one person unjustly is the same as killing all of humanity.

- Hinduism recognizes the entire universe as one family.
- Buddhism calls on us to cherish the oneness of all creation.

History shows that the true shapers of past cultures and civilizations have not been political leaders so much as spiritual leaders: Confucius, Buddha, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Paul, and Mohammed. Their teachings have shaped values and ethics, informed social systems, and evaluated the justice and injustice of political, economic and social systems. Yet today secularization and a new faith in science and technology have replaced religion as the shaper of civilization. And virtually all religions have been infected by fundamentalists who pervert religion to sanction murder.

All religious communities bear a great responsibility to demonstrate that their values, standards and attitudes can ameliorate conflict and create the conditions for peace. Religions need to answer the charge that they are the root cause of the hatred and fanaticism that continues to motivate terrorist attacks. This responsibility impelled more than 100 religious leaders of all the major faiths to meet in Moscow in July, 2006. They said:

We condemn terrorism and extremism of any form, as well as attempts to justify them by religion. We consider it our duty to oppose enmity on political, ethnic or religious grounds. We deplore the activities of pseudo-religious groups and movements destroying freedom and health of people as well as the ethical climate in societies. Using religion as a means for rousing hatred or an excuse for crimes against individuals, morality and humanity present a major challenge today.

Let us make this message from the World Summit of Religious Leaders our own.

The fractures of the modern world brought about by the culture of war make it imperative that religions now rise 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. Religion 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 affirm the sanctity 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 consciences of humanity with a message of unity. We have one destiny. We live or die together in the struggle for peace.

There are not good and bad civilizations. Rather, civilizations are complementary. The peaceful co-existence and the common development of

different civilizations can be achieved only through their learning and benefiting from one another on the basis of equality and mutual respect.

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. This goal requires nothing less for humanity to mature.

This conference, convened by the John Humphrey Centre for Peace and Human Rights, is about the dialogue necessary for us to reach the goal. In this short time we have together, we will build on the outcome of the previous John Humphrey Centre international conference on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Dialogue means respecting truth and sharing our common values, which we seek to transmit to the world. Respectful dialogue among civilizations is the only weapon capable of creating a climate of peace, security and trust among peoples and nations.

We recognize that there cannot be peace in the world without peace among religions. Indeed, the peace we seek will lead us to an alliance of civilizations.

Peace is inseparable from reconciliation, which itself is the highest form of dialogue. Reconciliation is the route to a global ethic. It includes

the capacity to listen, the capacity not only to convince but also to be convinced and, most of all, the capacity to extend forgiveness.

Reconciliation cannot be dealt with only at the institutional level; it is a challenge to the hearts and minds of individuals. Reconciliation demands that we seek peace with ourselves first.

This global ethic requires a longing and striving for peace with social justice. This is the spirit that we bring to our conference. It is the spirit that can overcome hatred and inspire us to reach out with loving contact to heal a suffering humanity.