

Reconciliation and Hope: A Religious Dialogue for Peace

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The peoples of the world have a sacred right to peace, and it is time for religions to reach out and help to heal a suffering humanity.

As we participate in this wonderful Inter-Faith Celebration marking the Centennial of the City of Edmonton, no theme should command our greater attention than what we can do to build peace in the world.

We assemble here in the name of the great religions in the world. In this community so blessed with a bountiful life, we can be both an inspiration and an agent for change.

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.

There is a great strength in religion and that strength must be used in these perilous times to speak out *against* the culture of war and *for* the culture of peace. Some say that war is necessary to combat terrorism. They are wrong. We need to face up to a hard reality: neither raw military strength, nor nuclear weapons, nor missile defences will defend us against the terrorists who lash out at humanity because of their consuming hatred. Such hatred exploits the brutalities of the poverty, oppression, and greed of modern society. Political and military strategists need to learn about the causes of that hatred. They need to understand that the best long-range defence lies in addressing the great injustices that are today increasing the divisions between

rich and poor, the powerful and the vulnerable, and the triumphant and the despairing.

All the major religions teach the essence of the culture of peace: Do not do unto others what you do not want done to yourself. Whether Christian or Jewish or Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist, this common ethical principle is at the base of religious teaching.

I do not mean to suggest that there are not important differences between religions. There are. We live in a world of differences. But differences must not be allowed to obscure our much more significant commonalities. These commonalities centre on the oneness of the human family. We all need fresh air, food, water, shelter, and the opportunity to develop ourselves. These human rights are inherent in our human nature.

Religion ought to help us affirm these commonalities in an equitable and just manner. Religion should not be misused as an instrument of division and injustice, betraying the very ideals and teachings that lie at the heart of each of the world's great traditions. Religion must find a way for its spiritual traditions to have their diverse communities work in harmony for the common good.

It is not just a matter of it being proper for religions to infuse values into civilization. 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

reconciliation that underscores all religions, speak out to build the conditions for peace.

Religion cannot become the state. But 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 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 consciences 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.

Religions are uniquely placed to contribute to a culture of peace by conducting dialogues – among themselves and with societal leaders at large. Religions will not lose by joining enthusiastically with secular humanists in the promotion of a global ethic that centers on the well-being of humanity. Dialogue – genuine, respectful conversations motivated by a common desire to serve humanity – is now critical.

This was the finding of a remarkable book, *Crossing the Divide*, published recently as a contribution to the U.N.'s Dialogue Among Civilizations. The book makes the point that reconciliation is the highest form of dialogue.

Reconciliation is a colossal undertaking, but in its absence, we will be confronted by lingering hatred, if not a perpetual state of war. Reconciliation is also 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 terrorism of September 11 makes this Dialogue all the more necessary. Those who dismiss it as either irrelevant or a form of appeasement should think again. Adopting a policy of retributive justice which punishes entire communities for the violent actions of a few quickly puts everyone at risk; instead, we must find ways to apply justice in a non-violent manner.

The Dialogue Among Civilizations sends a signal that diversity is not a threat: rather, it is a wealth the world society has yet to fully discover. Terrorists and bigots may be active and vociferous, but they are a minority. They must not be allowed to derail the culture of peace by inciting hatred and violence and opposing human rights in the name of a twisted interpretation of religion. They are prominent because their strong suit is to destroy, which

takes little time and marginal courage. To build a culture of peace and tolerance takes more courage and more time.

We in Edmonton can contribute to this dialogue. We need to discuss ways to overcome violence in our midst. We need to affirm peaceful solutions to conflicts. We need to recognize the beauty in one another. We need to ensure that our Muslim brothers and sisters are not discriminated against as a result of September 11, 2001 and that we understand that Islam is both a religion and a way of life that promotes social harmony and solidarity through its sacred texts and ethical systems. We need to instill into our children a thirst for social justice and infuse into public thinking that there is no peace without justice and no justice without forgiveness.

We have come together in this marvelous manifestation of unity today. But let this not be just a one-time event. I encourage all the religions present today to gather here again, at least once a year, for a common vigil for peace. Let us lift up our hearts and voices in an annual Inter-faith Day of Peace Vigil and help raise public awareness of the values of a culture of peace. With our faith and love, let us light a candle of hope for our whole community. The world needs the hope we offer. Let us transmit joyfully the hope we feel.

I close with the optimistic words of Isaiah: "Peace, peace to the far and near, says the Lord; and I will heal them."

Religion and peace: let these two words become one.

