

THE SENATE OF CANADA  
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# **Dialogue and Reconciliation: The Religious Step to Peace**

**By Senator Douglas Roche, O.C.**

**An address to Canadian Islamic Congress**

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I am deeply grateful to the Canadian Islamic Congress for awarding me the 2003 Peace Prize. I treasure this moment because it gives me an opportunity to discuss our shared values for peace. I pay my respects to Islam because it seeks peace through the pursuit of human rights, economic equity, and social justice. Indeed the Koran regards social justice as a necessary prerequisite for authentic peace. You and I are one in this common understanding.

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The recent awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Shirin Ebadi, a prominent Iranian human rights activist and a practicing Muslim, is welcome evidence of the importance of social justice and human rights in Islam. As a former judge, forced to step down after the Iranian revolution, Ms. Ebadi has used her legal skills to defend the human rights of those targeted by conservative factions within the Iranian government for their political views. Ebadi has argued forcefully that Islamic law must be interpreted in a way that upholds freedom of speech and religion, and fosters democratic governance. She has particularly focused her concerns on the most vulnerable

groups in her society: women, children, and refugees, and her commitment to defending their rights has been tested by numerous imprisonments.

Most importantly, the ideas espoused by Ms. Ebadi, along with the example set by her life, reveal the lie that has been spread, both by Islamic extremists and their fundamentalist opponents in other religions, that human rights and Islamic faith are irreconcilable. This lie has provided a useful cover for hard-line governments in the Muslim world anxious to justify their excessive powers. However, as Ebadi has succinctly noted, “[w]henever they kill people in the name of Islam, you should know they are misusing Islam, because Islam is the religion of peace and justice.” That is what we are celebrating tonight.

Nowhere was this abuse of Islam more evident than on September 11, 2001. A few days after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, I was invited to a Muslim prayer service in the El Rashid Mosque in my home city of Edmonton. I joined a number of Christians and Jews to pray for peace alongside our Muslim neighbours. The Imam, Shaban Sheriff, deeply concerned at

the backlash against Muslims occurring because the suicide terrorists were young Muslim men, said that Islam stands upon the pillars of justice and peace. He challenged his congregation to show the people of our community that they were good citizens who abhorred violence of any kind.

The Imam was chagrined that Osama bin Laden, widely assumed to be the force behind the hijackings in the U.S., had cited the Koran, Islam's holiest book, as the inspiration for the terrorist attacks. The more bin Laden revealed himself in subsequent months, the more it became clear that his motivation was not the Koran but his hatred of the secularism of the United States, which he held responsible for what he saw as the increasing decadence in Muslim countries. Nonetheless, selective quotations from the Koran were used by some in the West to endorse the view that Islam is essentially a fanatical and violent faith. In the months following the terrorist attacks, the number of anti-Muslim hate crimes increased. These hate-crimes must stop.

Muslim scholars around the world, appalled by the terrorist actions, have tried to explain that Islam is a peaceful, progressive,

inherently forgiving and compassionate religion. But Islam, no less than Christianity or Judaism, is subject to extremist elements which claim that their “war” against oppression is just. Christians have killed in the name of God, as have Hindus, Buddhists, Jews and others. In the wake of September 11, Muslims too have been accused of turning “divine commandments” into a God-given license to kill. We must resist this “hijacking” of the Muslim faith.

We must also resist the unjust persecution of Muslim people whether done through social slights or jailings. Policies such as racial profiling do not bring security, but instead harass the innocent and increase ethnic tensions wherever they are used. I call upon the Government of Canada to ensure that the laws of Canada afford full protection to the Muslim people in Canada.

I come before you as a Roman Catholic, conscious of the teaching of my own Church, contained in the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). In one of the Council documents, *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions, we read:

Upon the Muslims ... the Church looks with esteem. They adore one God, living and enduring, merciful and all-powerful,

Maker of heaven and earth and Speaker to men. They strive to submit wholeheartedly even to His inscrutable decrees, just as did Abraham, with whom the Islamic faith is pleased to associate itself. ... They prize the moral life, and give worship to God especially through prayer, almsgiving, and fasting.

Although in the course of the centuries many quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Muslims, this most sacred Synod urges all to forget the past and to strive sincerely for mutual understanding. On behalf of all mankind, let them make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace, and freedom.

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Islam does not fully advocate passivism. It permits the use of force when Muslims are not allowed to practice their faith, when people are oppressed and subjugated, and when people's land is forcibly taken from them. But indiscriminate attacks are prohibited; women, children and innocent civilians are to be protected.

The term *jihad*, so often misunderstood in the West, means "exertion on the path toward God." It is a struggle with one's base instincts: sin, oppression, greed, exploitation. In its deepest sense, it is an inner personal exertion, not a holy war, although it can also become an outer defensive action to protect one's community. The Muslim faith does not countenance a *jihad* against the West -- far from it. Muslim communities around the world were horrified that

their faith was so abused and made an instrument of evil by terrorist sects. Their martyrdom was not holy, but a wicked perversion. Islam does not teach Muslims to kill innocent people in the name of a political agenda. We must do more to promote this true teaching.

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All religious communities bear a great responsibility today 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 motivated the terrorist attacks. It is not just Islam and Judaism that need to respond. The killings inflicted by Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland are a sad example of internecine strife within Christianity. Ethnic conflict in the former Yugoslavia showed how Christianity can be twisted into contributing to xenophobic nationalism, and the tragic outcomes that can result from this. The religious voice, while not silent, is muted or blurred, constrained by fundamentalist elements which prevent it from speaking with one voice to the wounds of conflict.

Religions should not lose confidence that they can help to resolve conflict. Faith communities help to shape societies and cultures through the core values they proclaim. Interfaith cooperation can make shared values more evident. Religious leaders can contribute to conciliation and mediation efforts: think of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu. Faith communities can also give voice to the marginalized and poor. While the roots of conflict are deep and tangled, many of them are embedded in the soil of poverty, ignorance and underdevelopment. These problems ought to be a basic concern for religion, which can speak with one voice on behalf of the poor of the earth.

All the major religions teach the essence of what the culture of peace is all about: Do unto others what you would like done to you. This Golden Rule or ethic of reciprocity is found in the scriptures of nearly every religion and is often regarded as the most concise and general principle of ethics.

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 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 to affirm these commonalities in an equitable and just manner. Religion should not be misused as an instrument for 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, through its spiritual traditions, to enable cooperation between diverse communities, working in harmony for the common good. Religious communities are the largest and best-organized civil institutions in the world today, claiming the allegiance of billions of adherents. They are uniquely equipped to meet modern challenges: resolving conflicts, caring for the sick and needy, and promoting peaceful co-existence among all peoples.

The fractures in the modern world brought about by the culture of war make it imperative that religions now 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 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, or risk the violence that comes with discord. We have one destiny. We live or die together in the struggle for peace.

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Although I have a home in my own church, I feel responsible towards all churches and religions to foster the unity of the churches and peace among all religions. 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.

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 may 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 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.

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: it is a wealth the world society has yet to fully discover. The terrorists, the irresponsible politicians, the bigots may well 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.

That is the challenge I face, you face, the Canadian Islamic Congress faces, indeed all those who understand the spiritual crisis of

our times face. All of us – Muslim, Christian, Jew – must reach out in dialogue and reconciliation. That is the only way to lasting peace.