

Brothers and sisters, allow me to greet you with two Sikh salutations:

Waheguru ji ka khalsa, Waheguru ji ki fateh and Sat Sri Akaal.

A very good afternoon to you all.

1. Introduction

As a supporter of Religions for Peace, I am privileged, honoured and humbled to be addressing this plenary on **‘welcoming the other through human development that respects the earth’**. Allow me to say a few first words on ‘religion’ and ‘peace’, which for me lie at the heart and soul of Religions for Peace.

1a. Religion

The role of religion is to nurture good human beings. Religion thus has the potential to be a rich and illuminating shared resource to mobilise human virtue and integrity to address our most pressing contemporary global challenges. This solution-oriented potential of religion needs to be lovingly recognised by humanity.

The misperception that religion is but only a source of trouble is a myth based on the fringe phenomena of the misinterpretation, misquotation, misrepresentation and misuse of religion. It has led to the progressive marginalisation and secularisation of religion. The tide needs to turn, enabling greater recognition that religion is a source of immense goodness for human development and flourishing. It is important that secularity and spirituality reside in the same camp, joining hands for the common good.

When religious practitioners from the family of faiths interpret and practice genuine faith - with love, devotion and commitment, and devoid of superficiality and hypocrisy - then values, virtues and integrity of character will naturally emerge. Their actions and deeds will then inspire and motivate even those who are at best apathetic or at worst hostile towards religion.

It is logical that our contemporary global problems require global solutions, for which global infrastructure becomes a necessity. The UN is such an infrastructure which needs to be strengthened by nations. The work that Religions for Peace does with the UN is commendable, but greater faith solidarity is needed to harness religion’s potential at the UN’s highest policy and development levels.

1b. Peace

Peace is important within individuals, families, communities and societies worldwide. All peoples of this planet want peace, but we must work seriously for it. Human peace is dependent upon the compassion and forgiveness we can exercise and the truth,

contentment and humility we can practice. The root causes of the disturbance of peace are the human ego and arrogance, which must be more clearly recognised and controlled. They drive humans into cultures of greed, possessiveness, vengefulness, exploitation and denigration of the other. This is exacerbated by the spread of gun culture and manufacture and sale of lethal weapons of mass destruction. To forge and sustain peace, there is need for 'loving mass instruction', by disseminating wisdom on the art and skill of nurturing inward peace, the essential key to generating external peace in the world around us.

2. Welcoming the other

2a. Interconnectivity, collaboration and unity

In the world which has become a global village that we now inhabit, each member of the human family has a shared responsibility to collaborate for collective human development and flourishing. Not to engage in welcoming the other would be imprudent and a folly; to do so, however, will promote global unity and strength. This demands going beyond tolerating, accepting and respecting others to, indeed, making sacrifices for the other.

From the Sikh point of view, all of creation exists through the grace of One and only One Infinite Creator, whose presence is eternal and all-pervading. This explicit sacred truth underlines oneness. Our divine interconnectivity and interdependence cannot be denied. We have to collaborate and work together for the common good, for no member of humanity is an enemy, stranger or alien. With otherness negated, a sublime kinship emerges, creating a spirit of empathy, responsiveness and love, as opposed to hostility, apathy and conflict. This opens possibilities for accelerated progress towards conflict resolution and establishment of lasting peace.

2b. An ethos for advocacy, action and inter-religious collaboration

Advocacy, action, and collaboration require a guiding ethos, mindful of the overarching context of the intentions and endeavours of one's existence. This involves being conscious of the part in relation to the whole, the local in relation to the global, and, of our finite stay on earth in relation to the infinite context of the Creator and creation. This will propel us to widen our horizons, go beyond self-interest and exercise selflessness for global wellbeing.

A key action point for advocacy is a recommendation for enhanced faith solidarity and multi-religious cooperation. This will articulate and demonstrate to those who are wary or sceptical about religion, the positive social role which faith organisations can, and do, play in promoting fruitful partnerships in the transnational context. Such advocacy will promote a much-needed common vision of planetary unity and fraternity, seeking the welfare of all, which we as Sikhs refer to as '*sarbat da bhalla*'.

3. Human development

3a. Value-led human empowerment

A human's development starts before birth, not at the nursery or kindergarten. The conscious state of one's mind during the nine months in the womb is immensely influenced by one's mother's

mental state. The stress or tranquillity in her mind is dependent upon the positive or negative influence of her immediate kith and kin. Strengthening the sanctity of marriage, good parenting and a harmonious family atmosphere is thus invaluable. Hence overcoming the grassroots challenges of marital and family conflict and fractured and fragmented societies, both in the industrialised nations as well as the developing world, is of vital importance.

Human development lies in human empowerment through the practice of virtues, values and integrity. It entails the holistic development of the individual physically, mentally, spiritually and socially. Empowering each individual means that humanity's chain of 7.2 billion individuals stands empowered. Faith traditions provide a phenomenal reservoir and repository of timeless wisdom and long honed practice which should be mobilised and adopted, for more enduring human flourishing, fulfilment, freedom and peace.

The mind is an extremely important and powerful constituent of the human anatomy. By lovingly controlling the mind, we are able to positively influence what occurs in the world around us. Faith teaches and challenges the mind to recognise its core identity, capacity and potential as a manifestation of the divine. The mind, which can be our best friend or worst enemy, must thus be tenderly nurtured to become an instrument of change that is desirable and required.

Allow me to quote the preamble to UNESCO's constitution: *'Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed'*. It is evident that humanity has been unable to alter its mindset.

3b. A new consciousness and rejuvenated mindset for delivering the Millennium Development Goals

The MDGs were required to be significantly delivered by the year 2015. Already two additional MDGs of global extremism and the global financial crisis have been added. One can hope that the post 2015 strategic agenda may address the hindrances to their delivery. Since the inception of the MDGs, I have had a conviction that the solution to their delivery lies in arresting the erosion of human values and promoting a new consciousness with value-rejuvenated mindsets appropriate to the new globalised scenario. Hitherto, nations and society have only sought to combat the negativity of faith but neglected to address and mobilise its abundance of positivity. When the dignity of faith is restored, work on the delivery of the MDGs will get accelerated.

3c. Sikh spiritual and social charter: empowering the poor

Sikh life is based on the divine charter 'pray, work, share'. This interlinked cycle of practice promotes wisdom, humility, responsibility and accountability, a strong work ethic and a culture of generosity. Tackling poverty requires going further than offering 'charity', which on its own does not mobilise self-reliance. We must capacity-build with values and skills and create opportunities for the poor for them to become self-reliant, have self-respect to play a meaningful social role.

3d. Health and holistic wellbeing

There is a critical need to address spiritual, emotional and social wellbeing alongside the long established clinical and medical models for interpreting human health. From a faith perspective, the uncontrolled ego plays a role in causing pain, disease and mental suffering. Seeking the power of prayer, the company of the prayerful, and having faith and hope during ill health can serve to significantly reduce the impact of physical illness.

4. Respecting the earth

4a. Disposition-rich consciousness for safeguarding a sacred earth

According to Sikh teachings, all living beings are strung up in a divine thread of awesome ecology referred to as *kudrat* (nature). We are called to tenderly respect water, earth and air like beloved parents, who nurture, sustain and sacrifice themselves for us. When we lose all sensitivity towards mother earth, who is ever-giving and forbearing, she becomes unhappy and resentful, displaying stiff indignation through a host of environmental calamities. When our mindset deeply acknowledges nature's resources as sacred gifts, it is unbecoming to label them primarily as commercial commodities or territorial properties.

Our environment is actually the totality of circumstances or conditions surrounding us, encompassing the physical, material, emotional and spiritual dimensions at microcosmic and macrocosmic levels. It includes awesome order, fluidity, receptivity or chaos. It is influenced by forces of nature, the impact of biodiversity and, significantly, by the collective thoughts and actions of humans. When it is permeated with positive dispositions of care, responsibilities and respect, a gear change is possible in our ability to renew and sustain our environmental efforts.

4b. Preserving and enhancing the common heritage of mankind

The expression 'common heritage of mankind' significantly reflects human property rights and shared responsibility, as a legacy from past generations and endowment to future generations. This resonates in the words of John Ruskin, that the earth 'belongs as much to those who are to come after us and whose names are already written on the book of creation as to us.' Humanity should not do things for present delight nor for present use alone, but for the distant future.

4c. Community-based conservation and the preservation of the world's sacred sites

Community based conservation projects provide social models for restoring both natural and man-made environments, enhancing a sense of shared ownership. Hence it exemplifies ways of conserving values as opposed to bricks and mortar alone.

The collective safeguarding of the world's sacred sites greatly depends on achieving spiritual solidarity across the Abrahamic, Dharmic and other spiritual traditions. The preservation protocol for such sites being worked upon needs to be supported and accelerated.

5. Conclusion

Religion's potential to empower the mortal being with values, virtues and integrity, must be more fully recognised. So empowered, the human being is able to innately welcome the other and respect the earth in ways that create unity and strength in diversity, to enable individual and collective flourishing.

Thank you.

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