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Speech at the World Assembly of Religions for Peace, Vienna 21 November 2013

Welcoming the other through conflict prevention and transformation.

At this 9th World Assembly of Religions for Peace, we are here to address the human and spiritual imperative of welcoming the other. Ours is the arena of multi religious cooperation in words and deeds. Key goals are protection of inherent human dignity, equal citizenship and shared wellbeing for all. At a time of rising hostility towards the other we want to set free the energy of face to face dialogue and faith to faith challenges.

During our days here, we will share practical experiences and celebrate advancement and positive results of a plethora of bridge building efforts in more than 90 countries through our Interreligious Councils and similar structures and programs.

My focus today will be the spiritual motivation, the moral moorings and the emotional dynamics of our work. I believe that we need a self-critical dialogue appreciating our strength and acknowledging our failures. To me religion for peace is religion for change.

In the language of faith, to welcome the other is to bless the other. From my spiritual wellspring, I find inspiration in the words and life of Jesus. In the Sermon on the Mount he shares divine blessings with the vulnerable and the victims. He welcomes the poor and persecuted. His words inspire leadership for transformation:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for there is the kingdom of heaven

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God

Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

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These words transcend time and space. They are congenial to the spirit of every religion.

Let us who are gathered here under the programmatic emblem of Religions for Peace, find inspiration in these generous words of blessings for all peace makers, no one excluded. Peacemakers are called the children of God. A new translation is even stronger; “God calls us his children”— his sons and daughters.

Blessing is a unique expression of faith. A blessing is more than good wishes. It conveys a God given potential for change and a divine offer for a new beginning. The essence of a divine blessing is that we are welcomed by God and embraced by divine love. Its impulse is for us to share this love in welcoming the other. To welcome the other is to bless the other.

Religion for peace is a bold statement of faith. This is our great belief; religion is for peace, not for war, for justice not for injustice, for love, not for hatred. This we need to assert again and again at a time when many are weary of two faced religion. We need to convince the world that religion is a genuine force for good, not a poisonous wellspring for death and destruction.

As blessing is the language of religion, prayer is the language of humanity. In prayers we express our longing, our dreams, and our struggles. Prayer is the hope for a better tomorrow. Prayer is to claim the better tomorrow.

At this World Assembly of Religions for Peace we will struggle with contemporary issues of religion and peace. We will be reminded that this is a time for religious leaders to be humble and self-critical, not pompous about power and position.

As we gather from all corners of the world, we are mindful that our action often overshadows our preaching, and our inaction mocks our Holy texts. What we do defines who we are, what we leave undone burdens on our conscience

In this spirit we need to reflect on the place and role of religion in the world today. We need to develop visions for a future of reconciled diversity, tolerance and mutual respect. We need to face these challenges, not with timidity but with determination.

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We are here to meditate on the transforming power of faith and the frailty of human leadership. We speak to religion and to politics, these two interconnected and mighty forces shaping individual life and human destiny.

Why, we need to ask, why this frequent cry: Keep religion out? Maybe the answer is religious leaders who do not understand the depths of depravity exposed in the name of faith? Indeed we need to wake up to the complicity of religion with oppression. Yes, we need to take seriously the challenge of those who reject religion as a credible source for good. They draw on painful human experience.

Religions for Peace, humbly asserts that religion and peace belong together, that peace is not only a state of mind, but a mind of state- We argue that religion belongs in the secular as well as in the sanctuary, that true spirituality is expressed in personal devotion and in social action.

We reassert this fundamental linkage of religion and society at a time when fanaticism is on the rise, when sectarianism and nationalism, are disfiguring not only the face of faith, but destroying community of peoples.

We witness today a growing fear of the other. Conflict begets fear, and fear is the seed of conflict: fear of the other, - his faith, her beliefs, their social habits, their culture and values. Therefore the need to demonstrate that faith is the opposite of fear.

As a world assembly of religions, we are conscious that we are different from each other in many respects and that we will remain different. The beauty of this assembly is in spite of this, the possibility it offers to convince the skeptics of the healing potential of faith as we warmly accept each other, as we risk a hug that overcomes age old and entrenched barriers and tears down walls of separation.

My remarks are informed by my years as a leader of the European Council of Religious Leaders (ECRL) and of the leadership of the world body of Religions for Peace.

The European Council of Religious Leaders brings together religious leaders, men and women from all faiths with long historic roots in Europe, the Abrahamic traditions, as well as religions with a shorter presence in this continent. In the spirit of mutual recognition and cooperation we seek to address issues of human rights and human dignity in Europe and beyond.

Majority and minority in terms of number of adherents is not an issue in the council. All voices carry the same weight. This demonstrates eloquently the value welcoming the other in the spirit mutual respect and freedom of religion.

ECRL has through a number of statements and declarations addressed the particular challenges for Europe of today in welcoming the other. Thus we have issued seminal statements on such topics as culture of peace, tolerance, and human rights. The importance of these statements is of course primarily in their message, but they also carry special weight as consensus documents of a council with broad representations of all major faiths in Europe. We have i. a taken a stance for the right of all religions to be visible in the public square, for the right to displaying religious symbols and building places of worship which conform to each religious tradition.

When Religions for Peace holds its world assembly here in Europe, we are conscious of the heavy burden of history, the horrors of crusades, religious wars, and world wars that have shaped faith and life in this continent. Here at the crossroads of a continent increasingly affected by under currents of intolerance we want to voice a message of mutual respect.

The Norwegian terrorist, Anders Behring Breivik, committed unspeakable atrocities under the pretext of saving Europe from the onslaught of Islam. Our response must be to honor the positive contribution of Islam to European history. *Let there be no doubt after this assembly; Islam belongs to the past, present and the future of Europe.*

Here in Vienna on November 9th, Jews Muslims and Christians came together to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Kristallnacht. In Norway a young girl had to cancel her appeal at a similar event due to death threats.

More than 1400 synagogues and Jewish prayer houses were destroyed in Germany and Austria, in the first major demonstration of Hitler's plan to annihilate European Jewry. It was a first station on the way towards Auschwitz, Belsen and other places that for ever are seared into world history as expressions of the deepest depravity of man, and as examples of the ultimate crime against humanity.

Let there be no doubt; from this platform, in the name of Religions for Peace; we unequivocally reject every old and new form of anti-Semitism.

In 1970, the German Chancellor Willy Brandt fell on his knees in front before the memorial of the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto. Later he is reported to have explained that this was not planned, but at the abyss of German history, under the weight of millions who were murdered, he did what man does when words fail.

The impact of the Christian message is indelibly printed in the spiritual and moral fiber of Europe. The checkered history of our churches notwithstanding does not invalidate the importance of Christian faith to present day Europe, and to the Europe of tomorrow. Our witness is critical for maintaining the soul of Europe.

Let there be no doubt, Christianity will continue to be present in everyday life of Europe, being a spiritual source of a meaningful life for millions and speaking prophetically to the political and social agenda of the day.

As servants of world religions, we are here to call on European citizens, their leaders and institutions, to multiply their attempts to curb an increasing number of neo Nazi groups and extremist political parties. These elements are spreading unfounded fear. They are feeding on nationalistic sentiments. Their delusion of superiority is demonstrated in hatred of the different other.

Today the Roma people is the most discriminated population across Europe. They too were targeted for extinction by Hitler. Today they are at the bottom in every European country, despised, harassed and rejected.

It should be deeply disturbing to people of faith, that increasingly European countries are fortifying our borders to keep out asylum seekers and refugees especially from Africa and Syria. Europeans are forgetting how we are welcomed around the world. Our cynical response to day is to close our hearts and shut our doors on those who out of despair are seeking rescue on our shores. Borders are built to keep the poor out. This goes against the ethics of every religion and belief.

The fatal abuse of capitalism, market economy and soulless materialism, has caused great misery and deep depression in many countries in Europe. The traditional welcoming spirit in countries has been quenched by joblessness, social deprivation and deep anxiety. Young and old are experiencing a new age of despair. This makes Europe a fertile ground for propaganda against foreigners, and rejection of the other whose situation is even worse.

Add to this litany the increase in hate speech in social media and violence in the streets of Europe, and the frequency of racist outbursts and subtle discrimination. Hate crimes are on the rise. This is the other face of a continent that boasts a commitment to open society and pluralism that takes pride in its own Human Rights Convention and is the home of the International Criminal Court.

In Europe and beyond, globalization may be a positive force for peace, development and the rule of law. But the reaction to globalization is also evident in fear of losing one's own identity, increasing nationalism and religious isolationism.

Challenges to religion as a source of faith and a power for reconciliation are not only seen in Europe in the 21st century but is in evidence on every continent:

- Let me mention a few examples that demonstrate that all religions on every continent are vulnerable to distortion and abuse.
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- In the name of Christ, "The Lord's army" continues to bring fear and death in the African continent. The civil war in Rwanda, causing one of the greatest single massacres in the continent, and affecting millions of innocent men, women and children, was a war among Christian tradition. (The long running confrontation in Northern Ireland, as a conflict between Protestants and Catholics, is a constant reminder of deep seated hostilities with complex roots and history.
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- In parts of Africa, the Muslim Al Shabab continues to spread death and destruction, as recently witnessed in the carnage in Kenya. Other Al Qaida connected groups are attempting to destabilize several countries. In Nigeria Boko Haram, fuelled by historic tensions between Muslim and Christian dominated regions, brings despair to neighborhood and nation,.

In Asia, tensions and conflicts continue to cause misery and death. In Myanmar the process towards democracy and freedom is marred by the attempt at ethnic cleansing like attacks on the Rohingya population. This conflict is about nationality, race, ethnicity, poverty, human rights with religion as a marker of identity. The onslaught now put in peril Muslims in other parts of the country. International concerns as expressed i.a. by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, are widespread. The UN human Rights ambassador calls on religious leaders to be engaged in solving the conflict.

Outbursts of Buddhist nationalism is a cause of concern not only in Myanmar but also in Sri Lanka.

In countries like Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan distortion of religion and misrepresent the message of the Prophet. Hindu/Muslim tensions are an ever present threat to communities on the Indian sub-continent.

In the Middle East, the Israeli Palestinian conflict with no solution in sight is about history, land, poverty, human rights, freedom and security. It is also about religious identity, holy history, holy land, holy sites and holy texts.

The promise of the Arab spring is turning into a nightmare as attempts at democracy are derailed. The clock is turned back to the time of autocratic rule and oppression of religion.

In Syria the nation is in shreds and the people bleeding to death. Millions are infernally displaced or refugees in neighboring countries. A multitude of religious factions are engaged in a civil war with no end in sight.

A particularly obscene form of violence is the almost daily targeted attacks by suicide bombers on holy sites, on worshippers in their sanctuaries, on innocent men and women and their children, especially on their holy days and during pilgrimages to holy shrines. In these cases the religious element becomes particularly evident. Holy days have become hellish days. To the world this tragic escalation of sectarian conflict epitomizes the callousness and inhumanity of leaders who profess to be driven by religion.

What can we learn from these depressive scenarios of the unwelcome other, in Europe and world wide? Is there a role for Religions for Peace? Of course there is. That is our *raison d'être*.

Let me suggest a few steps in a strategy for conflict prevention and transformation?

Firstly, we must continue the interreligious approach of dialogue and common action.

If religion is to play a role for conflict prevention and transformation we must boldly and with perseverance pursue avenues of dialogue and cooperation. The well established strategy of regional structures on every continent, with independent national councils in more than 70 countries needs to be expanded. Key to its success is that the councils are owned by

religious leaders in every country, it is their responsibility to define and implement viable and contextually relevant programs to prevent conflicts and bring healing and harmony. The involvement of women and youth is crucial to the broadest possible ownership of our movement and to its rootedness and relevance for de grassroots.

We must build synergies with moderate forces. We must identify possible confluence of processes base on shared values, we must be open for cooperation between different religions, civil society and state actors. Ours must be openness towards dialogue with all stakeholders, not excluding any one who is open to dialogue.

Secondly we must face up to the intra religious challenge.

There are situations that can not be adequately addressed from outside, as an interreligious issue, but must be solved from within as an intra-religious matter. The Shiite Sunni divide, is today one of the most dramatic conflicts on the world stage, affecting not only millions and millions of innocent lives, but demoralizing religious leaders and undermining the great legacy of the Prophet. Religions for Peace must continue to encourage Muslim leaders to draw on the well spring of moderate Islam. Existing fatwa, and teachings of prominent Islamic scholars, declaring terrorism un-Islamic, must be disseminated globally.

Thirdly we must strengthen a comprehensive education for tolerance.

We need to revisit our own internal communication especially sermons for the faithful. We must communicate in the clearest possible terms, that there is no greater blasphemy than to misuse religion for deeds of destruction that the greatest apostasy is to hijack God for unholy war. Education is a key to transformation. This goes for both formal and informal education. It challenges the ethical quality of curricula in state school systems and religious institutions but it also alerts us to the tone and content of sermons and other forms of education offered in churches, temples synagogues and mosques

Young people are lured by promise of heavenly reward, or they are brainwashed in religious schools to join terrorist groups. We must in no uncertain terms make it clear that war in the name of God is war on God. God can not be honored by bombs. That such heresy offers destruction rather than salvation, despair rather than hope, enslavement rather than freedom.

Fourthly we need to strengthen our strategy for freedom of religion.

Without freedom of religion there can be no true dialogue and no honest common action on the ground. Freedom of religion is suffering a set back in many countries under the pretext of fighting extremism. Freedom of religion, freedom of assembly and freedom of expression are inseparably linked. Legislation to secure freedom of religion must be implemented by central and local administration. The level of social hatred is increasing in many countries even if the political will to curb religious intolerance is stated policy.

For Religions for Peace freedom of religion must be a priority. One important advance in such a strategy is the establishment of The Universal Code of Holy Sites which aims at protecting places of worship, shrines and cemeteries. This deserves strong support also by international organizations like the UN and the Council of Europe.

Fifthly we need to promote justice, truth and reconciliation, rule of law and respect of human rights.

If in the name of God, democracy is being scorned, human rights scoffed and rule of law denigrated religion must promote the law of respect and the respect of law. It is imperative for religious leaders to address specific crimes against humanity and war crimes. Key to all transformation is truth, justice and reconciliation. Many truth and reconciliation processes have skipped the justice issue. But victims have long and painful memories. They may be suppressed out of shortsighted political expediency, but if not addressed they tend to resurface. Suffice it to mention the examples of Argentina, Chile and Cambodia.

Even the celebrated truth and reconciliation process in South Africa which set a standard for many other similar processes, may have taken the justice issue too lightly, giving cause to social unrest.

It demands courage and integrity of religious leaders to advocate justice, tolerance and mutual respect. There are cases where religious leaders are silenced out of fear for their own security.

Finally we need to support the agenda of civil society and of organizations promoting international law and global peace.

One of our most promising options is to build alliances based on a shared commitment to the integrity of every human being and to our life sustaining environment. The struggle against climate change is congenial to the moral principles of all religions.

After the Millennium Development Goals which were grounded in religious ethics and values, our support should be mobilized for a viable the post- 2015 strategy for sustainable development.

Likewise the efforts underway at the Human Rights Council to promote a declaration of human rights to peace, reflects a widely shared religious conviction.

The struggle to rid the world of weapons of mass destruction enjoys broad religious support. The issue of nuclear weapons has been on the agenda of Religions for Peace since its beginning in Japan in 1970, and it must be accelerated in support of a binding UN convention against nuclear arms.

Death penalty is sanctioned in religious texts, but need not be interpreted as the mandatory reaction to certain crimes. Today religious leaders can not escape the challenge posed by an increasing number of states who are abolishing death penalty. If a secular state upholds the sanctity of life, in abolishing death penalty, how can religious leaders continue to promote this inhumane practice?

Finally we must keep alive the dream of a transformed humanity.

As we have recently celebrated one of history's most famous speeches, that of Martin Luther King 50 years ago, we have been reminded of the importance of dreams. His dream of the Promised Land easily translates in to the struggle for oppressed people on every continent.

Religions for Peace, is a dream waiting to become true. One of our esteemed leaders, the Nobel Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu speaks of *Gods dream* for our planet and for the human family.

This time in the heart of Austria, in this historic capital, at the crossroads of religion and culture in Europe, we are here to open the gates of Vienna for truth, justice and reconciliation. We are here to close the gates of Europe to xenophobia and hatred.

It is my prayer, that in the cold of the European winter we will sense the fragrance of spring yet to come.

Friends, let us continue to dream of the promised land as we yearn for the morning yet to dawn.

To dream of the Promised Land is to mirror the dream of God. To share Gods dream is the beginning of transformation. Religion for Peace is a dream yet to be fulfilled.