

Religions for Peace

Opening Remarks
Dr. William Vendley — Secretary General
Religions for Peace 9th World Assembly
Vienna, Austria
20 November 2013

Venerable Religious Leaders, International Trustees and Partners —

Welcome to all.

Dear Friends, our 9th World Assembly has convened under the theme, “*Welcoming the other.*” We need to ask: “What do we mean by ‘*welcoming the other*’?”

Let me offer three points for our consideration:

First, Peace is “positive.” For Religions for Peace, Peace has always been “more” than the absence of war or violence.

Second, Grave threats to Peace call for common action. We have discerned these threats since our 1st Assembly more than forty years ago.

And third, today we face a new threat to peace — rising hostility among social groups — that calls us, urgently, to “*welcome the other.*”

First, Peace is Positive.

Each person here knows that for his or her religion, Peace is supremely “positive.” So supremely positive that religious believers are willing to sacrifice themselves for others out of love and compassion.

We recall: Hindu Mahatma Gandhi fasting, then losing his life for unity and freedom.

We recall: Buddhist Venerable Tep Vong (here with us) left for dead by the Pol Pot Regime and then emptying himself to heal its devastation.

We recall: Jewish Rabbis Abraham Herschel and Maurice Eisendrath locked arm-in-arm with African Americans in their captivity.

We recall: Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer hanged for standing against the obscenities of Nazism, and Mother Theresa embracing the beauty of the forsaken in their deaths.

We recall: Muslim Sheikh Abd el-Kader saving 10,000 Christians in Damascus after years of detention in France, and Grand Mufti Emeritus Mustafa Ceric (here with us) sacrificing for peace in the aftermath of Srebrenica.

We recall: Similarly exceptional Indigenous Believers, Taoists, Zoroastrians, Jains, Sikhs and Baha'i that have given themselves to those around them, sometimes at great personal cost.

These — and countless other religious believers — make personal sacrifices, large and small, out of their supremely positive visions of Peace. The “lesser good” is willingly surrendered for the “greater good,” or even the “Supreme Good.” Usually this is done with the ease of the “habits” that we call virtues; sometimes this is done with agonizing difficulty, and often it is done with joy.

This call to engage in self-giving and self-sacrificing — to advance human dignity and shared well being in harmony with the earth — has been at the heart of *Religions for Peace's* positive vision of Peace, a multi-religious vision expressed in terms of shared values, not doctrines.

Second, Grave Threats to Peace Call for Common Action.

It is the “light” of our shared positive vision of Peace that brings into bold relief the bitter contradictions, the searing personal failures, and the deadening social exclusions that so wound human experience.

From our beginning, *Religions for Peace* has recognized that threats to Peace include:

- the blood of war,
- the obscene proliferation of arms, including weapons of mass destruction,
- the chokehold of extreme poverty,
- mindless assaults on nature,
- the horror of preventable child mortality and thwarted development,
- the scandal of major abuses of human dignity and denials of basic rights, and
- the perverse misuse of our religions in support of violence and terrorism.

These are shared threats to Peace.

It is both our shared positive vision of Peace and these shared threats to peace that bring our different religious communities together for common action in *Religions for Peace*.

Third, Rising Hostility Calls Us to “Welcome the Other.”

Today, there is a rising tide of hostility among social groups, including religious communities. This rising tide threatens to engulf anyone or any group not willing to resist it. And this rising tide of hostility both adds to and profoundly exacerbates all of the other threats to Peace we have identified.

Rising hostility against the “other” typically targets the vulnerable. They are refugees and displaced persons. They are migrant workers and immigrants. They are ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities.

Religion-related hostilities — harassment, intimidation and abuse — proliferate. Terrorism grows and perhaps metastasizes — more than 8,500 terrorist attacks killed over 15,000 people last year.

Every attack, every hate crime, every insult, every humiliation is amplified in the media and sends out a polarizing wave, fuelling the rise in hostility.

Governments, too, are entangled in this rising tide. A recent Pew study indicates that the percentage of countries with high levels of governmental restrictions on religion has increased from 29 percent in

2007 to 40 percent in 2011— now affecting about 75% of the world’s population. Unfortunately, the growth of government restrictions on religion is matched by increased measures of social hostility.

As we gather here, the suffering of all Syrians tears our hearts. Our own beloved Honorary President, Metropolitan Ibrahim, is held captive, kidnapped in Syria along with his brother Bishop, Metropolitan Yazji. But what the good Syrian religious leaders — Muslims and Christians — know too well is that the political conflict has been tipping over into a sectarian one fueled by violent extremists. As a result, the waves of social hostility are rising and ricocheting across the neighboring states and indeed every corner of the earth.

Today’s tsunami of rising hostility is the opposite of a culture of peace; it is a culture of hate. Rising hostility clouds and distorts the lens by which a group can assess what is right or wrong. And this occurs on all levels of human living, including the level of feelings, which are simultaneously dulled, coarsened and inflamed. In the end, rising hostility fosters the acceptance of barbarism and butchery, justifying them, saying they are “right.”

How can we bring light into this sinkhole of darkness? How can we bring light where it is most desperately needed?

We can “*welcome the other.*” We can “*welcome the other*” as our neighbor and as a cherished member of our human family.

“*Welcoming the other*” is the antidote to the rising tide of social hostility. *Welcoming the other* — as a shared element of positive Peace — is the “light” in which we can see the rising tide of hostility for what it is: an aberration, a self-destructive dead-end, a perversion of what each of our religions knows as Peace.

“*Welcoming the other*” means that we must robustly advance tolerance for the “other.” Tolerance, we recall, is at the very heart of international human rights standards.

“*Welcoming the other*” also calls each religious believer to go beyond tolerance by standing in solidarity with the dignity of the “other,” with

the full force of his or her religious commitment. This means self-giving and self-sacrificing for the protection of the other.

“Welcoming the other” joyously calls us to not only protect human dignity, but also — positively — to advance its full flourishing through the comprehensive development of human beings on all levels: physical, intellectual, affective, artistic, moral and religious.

“Welcoming the other” necessarily includes efforts to build just political regimes that grant citizenship that honors human dignity and the rights that flow from it, including freedom of religion.

“Welcoming the other” calls us to prevent, and whenever possible, resolve conflicts non-violently.

“Welcoming the other” calls us to work to abolish the weapons of mass destruction and the excessive investments in arms.

“Welcoming the other” calls us to care for children, to welcome those who could survive and thrive through the efforts that we can make.

“Welcoming the other” delights in women as equal partners in Peace building, and labors to “restore” their dignity whenever it has been affronted.

“Welcoming the other” means breaking the chokehold of poverty and honoring our earth.

“Welcoming the other” calls us — the world’s religious communities — to be the great educators on “*welcoming the other.*” Our entire *Religions for Peace* movement must equip itself to help ensure that our mosques, churches and temples become centers of informal education on “*welcoming the other.*”

In short, we “*welcome the other*” when we work together to resist threats to human dignity and shared well-being, and when we work to advance their positive flourishing. We do this by welcoming each person into the co-building, co-nurturing and co-stewarding of our shared well-being, which includes living in harmony with nature.

Consider, fellow Delegates and esteemed partners at this Assembly, how “*welcoming the other*” is both a profoundly positive “good,” a true element of our shared vision of Peace, and simultaneously an essential “action” we must take together to counter rising hostility and other shared threats to Peace.

Conclusion

Let us work with confidence in this Assembly, knowing that we can draw on the good will of all here to both welcome and be welcomed. Let us work with humility and hope to further discern shared positive elements of peace, as well as the grave threats that imperil us all. Doing so will offer a sober — yet supremely fertile — foundation for our common action for Peace.

Thank you for your kind attention.

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