

Religions for Peace

Religions for Peace - Mirage or Miracle?

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Speech at a dinner in honor of Dr Azza Karam, Secretary General of Religions for Peace, Oslo, May 22, 2023

Dear friends,

The dinner tonight is historic for two reasons:

Firstly, we welcome Professor Azza Karam, Secretary General of *Religions for Peace*, on her first official visit to Norway. It is an honour and a joy.

Secondly, Ingrid Rosendorf Joys is hosting this important event on behalf of the Council of Religious and Life Stance Communities, which recently has become an associate member of *Religions for Peace*. We celebrate this signal on the global level of the Norwegian interfaith model.

Ingrid has invited me to introduce *Religions for Peace* in 7 minutes. Jesus teaches us to forgive seventy times seven. So, there should be plenty of forgiveness if I exceed your limit by a few minutes.

I have chosen to present *Religions for Peace* by the ten world assemblies since 1970. In the contemporary world agenda context, their themes are signposts along fifty years of an interfaith pilgrimage. I do so under the lens of a question. Mirage or miracle? And a motto: Different faiths -common action.

- 1. The first Assembly, in Kyoto in 1970, focused on "Advancing Peace through Disarmament, Development and Human Rights.", led by the Buddhist layperson Nikkyo Niwano. He firmly believed in the power of non-violence and the unifying force of religion. Religion for Peace is the legacy of his farsighted dedication to peace.*

Amid cold war tensions and the accelerating war in Vietnam, the participants in Kyoto established the essential link to the United Nations and pioneered the UN NGO Committee on Disarmament.

- 2. The second Assembly was held in Leuven, Belgium, in 1974 with the theme: "World Religions-World Peace". But, unfortunately, again, the body met under the continued threat of nuclear annihilation.*

- 3. In Princeton, USA, in 1979, President Jimmy Carter welcomed the focus on "Religion in the Struggle for World Community" at the third Assembly. The USSR invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian Revolution were heavy on the agenda. It was at this Assembly that Chinese religious leaders joined the movement.*

Even more importantly, the participants integrated the role of women in religion and society into the fundamental self-understanding of religious leadership. Therefore, defending the inviolable dignity and rights of women and girls would be one of the pillars of *Religions for Peace*.

Religions for Peace

"We are convinced that practices, prejudices or laws that prevent the full participation of women along with men in the political, economic, social, cultural and religious life of their countries are morally indefensible and should be eliminated."

4. Amid decolonization efforts and the anti-apartheid struggle, *the Nairobi Assembly 1984 gathered under the motto: "Religions for Human Dignity and World Peace".*

The fight against racism and discrimination based on race, ethnicity, and gender would hereafter be one of the defining dimensions of the organization's life.

Nairobi also signalled the inclusion of youth as an integral element in the body of *Religions for Peace* with significant impacts in years to come.

5. *In Melbourne 1989, the theme read: "Building Peace through Trust. From Cold War to Star Wars, emphasis was made on liaison among religious leaders from the Soviet, Europe and the USA. Faith communities and religious leaders could contribute to building trust through transparency and communication.*

Importantly also, this Assembly decided on a World summit of religious leaders in support of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This initiative was the beginning of a crucial Global partnership with UNICEF.

6. Back in Europe, *in 1994, in the small town of Riva del Garda, Italy, participants were invited to consider "Healing the World: Religions for Peace."* In this post-cold War atmosphere, civil wars were raging. Peace initiatives by *Religions for Peace* included former Yugoslavia, Bosnia Herzegovina, Sierra Leone, and Liberia.

7. *In 1999 in Amman, Jordan, King Abdullab welcomed the Assembly to consider "Action for Common Living."*

With the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the backdrop, the Assembly considered conflict resolutions in fifteen states.

The Assembly took two significant humanitarian initiatives. First, it decided to hold *A Pan African religious leader conference on HIV/AIDS* in partnership with the UN.

This ground-breaking humanitarian initiative was coupled with a *Hope for African Children* program in 10 African states. The impact of these programs was significant, resulting in 180 million dollars raised for services linked to *Religions for Peace* structures.

8. *In 2006 Religions for Peace returned to its geographic and spiritual roots in Kyoto, Japan. "Confronting violence and advancing Shared Security."* The nuclear death umbrella hangs still over the world as an ominous threat with the first nuclear test in North Korea.

The 9/11 terrorist attack had inaugurated a new face of terrorist threat shaking the mightiest from within, with repercussions globally, as demonstrated by the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Track II negotiations among representatives from Iraq, North and South Korea, Sudan, and Sri Lanka dominated the program. In addition, the behind-the-scenes conversations between representatives of Israel and Palestine seemed to go so well that the Secretary-General invited them to report to the plenary.

Religions for Peace

However, this became such an acrimonious shouting match between the two sides that their respective supporters marched out of the hall.

On the more hopeful side, a global multi-religious youth-led global campaign, "Arms Down", was launched, which in a few years would contribute to the worldwide landmine campaign and the small arms focus, especially on Asia and Africa.

9. *The ninth Assembly, 2013, in Vienna, Austria*, which took place in the context of violent extremism and rising social hostility, deepened the humanitarian dimension shared by religions. This challenge was captured under the theme "*Welcoming the other – Advancing Human Dignity, Citizenship and Shared Well-being.*"

Key terms were human dignity and citizenship, as reflected, i.e., in the Arab Spring. In addition, two emerging crises affected the agenda: the increasing tragedy of migration and refugees and the increasing climate crisis. First, *Religions for Peace* strengthened its programmatic partnership with UNHCR and UNICEF.

On the other, the tracks were laid toward the 2015 Paris Climate Summit. Faith-based support of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals led to a program with the Vatican focusing on ethics in action.

10. Finally, the 10th Assembly in Lindau in 2019, *Caring for our common future – Advancing shared well-being.*"

In his welcoming speech, The Federal President of Germany, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, inspired a more than thousand strong audience with the keyword "Imagine" as he affirmed the role of religion and faith in diplomacy, democracy, and justice.

The Assembly developed a faith-based affirmation of the understanding of positive peace. As chair of the Assembly Program Committee, I drew on my 17 years as a Nobel Peace Prize Committee member. To me, the concept of peace is a dynamic inclusion of what served for cessation of armed conflict and peaceful resolution of disputes, but also nation-building, democracy, human rights, and humanitarian support, including the ecological dimension highlighted in the climate crises.

The Assembly highlighted women's increasing role in the leadership of religion and society through a special presentation of women leaders worldwide. The election of Professor Azza Karam as the first woman Secretary-General of *Religions for Peace* subsequently affirmed this epic shift. An Egyptian-born Muslim woman, professor of Religion and Development, and with long experience in various positions at the United Nations, Professor Karam embodies what *Religions for Peace* stands for today at the crossroads of multi-dimensional global crises.

With the global anti-nuclear community, the Assembly celebrated the UN Treaty against nuclear weapons and rededicated the movement to actively promote and implement the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals with an eye on 2030.

The two outstanding features of the Assembly, illustrating the scope of interfaith relevance in today's world, were Myanmar's peace process and the importance of saving the rainforests to mitigate climate disaster. After hearing from religious and civil society leaders about the military dictatorship in Myanmar and from indigenous leaders about the rainforest crisis of the Amazonas, the Assembly unanimously endorsed the work of the Religion for Peace Advisory Forum on Peace and Reconciliation in Myanmar and the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative.

Religions for Peace

Religions for Peace- mirage or miracle? What could be the answer after fifty years guided by the motto: Different faiths in common action "? My answer is neither a mirage nor a miracle. Yes, *Religions for Peace* is a vision. But its uniqueness is action. Judged by its achievements of fifty years, the organization has delivered in the daily lives of millions and proven its sustainability.

Our history shows that the movement succeeds when people of goodwill, inspired by faith and philanthropy, contribute to the unity and equality of all. Its secret is a concerted action across different faiths and worldviews. Not forgetting failures and endless uphill battles, our history shows the strength of a hard-won unity of purpose.

My lesson learned in the leadership of *Religions for Peace* since 1999, and as a member of the program committees of three world assemblies, is loyalty to the vision paired with humility tested by the daily realities of this global organization.

Hence, when I speak of religion and peace, mine is not a statement of triumph but of contradiction; I speak of religion for better and worse. Our vulnerability is our strength.

Therefore, to join the family of *Religions for Peace* is to mobilize the positive resources of faith *and* faith *in* humanity. Together we affirm that shared human dignity is the foundation as well as the aspiration of all humankind. Moreover, we are struggling to come to terms with the growing insight that our entire global habitat, mother nature, in all her manifestations, is crying out for respect.

The last signpost, so far, the theme of the 10th Assembly, epitomizes what *Religions for Peace* is about today.

Caring for our common future is our call to action.