

Religions for Peace

Episode 1: Introducing Shared Sacred Flourishing

INTRO: Hello, I'm Bishop Kari Alvsvåg with *Religions for Peace*, the world's largest multi-faith group dedicated to addressing the world's many crises and advancing the common good. Welcome to our new podcast series "Shared Sacred Flourishing. It envisions a future where your well-being depends not just on what you personally gain, but also on how well your neighbors, your community, and the Earth itself are doing.

In the following episode, you and your host Adam Phillips will take a deep dive into what we call a "Shared Sacred Worldview" and the practical interfaith approaches that can make Shared Sacred Flourishing a reality. So, without further ado, here's Adam.

HOST: Hi. I'm Adam Phillips, and I'll be your companion for the first of our monthly *Religion for Peace* podcasts.

As its name suggests, the Shared Sacred Worldview places the Sacred as the necessary ingredient in the work of helping humanity, and even life itself, to thrive. It views our care for one another as a divine calling, and assumes that most people are spiritually motivated, whatever their personality, culture or religion.

First, we need to face an uncomfortable fact: We're living in a moment of tangled global crises: climate change, violence and displacement, runaway consumption, rising fear, and a quiet loneliness that saps trust.

According to Dr. Francis Kuria, the Secretary General of *Religions for Peace*, these crises are an outgrowth of a rigidly secular worldview that sees progress only in material terms and where people are taught to live only for themselves.

Dr. Francis Kuria: They have been told they need to compete, they need to be the best, and everybody else is out to get them. It is a worldview that is informed by a selfish interest that seeks to reduce everything to what I can get, not what I can contribute. This worldview is very prevalent, and it is very powerful. That is what is driving this poly-crisis.

HOST: In this series, we will try to answer a deep but simple question: what changes when our motives are based in the shared sacred values and commitments that bind us, and not on what we can accumulate? Dr. Kuria says that is *exactly* the way of life that a Shared *SACRED* Worldview gives rise to.

Dr. Francis Kuria: In the sense that it sees my wholeness (and) my wellbeing in the context of the community that I live in, and the whole society that we live in. You have to understand that it is the relationships that we build that are most important. My flourishing and my neighbor's flourishing are linked!

HOST: Shared Sacred Flourishing is the driving ideal at *Religions for Peace*, the world's largest multi-faith body. *Religions for Peace* has over 100 top religious leaders in its World Council and represents



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thousands of religious leaders from nearly every living faith dedicated to the work of making Shared Sacred Flourishing a universal reality.

HOST: Some may doubt that a sacred outlook would be effective in addressing the many crises we face. They may think that organized religion has no place in today's world, with all its science and high tech and competition. However, it turns out that that secular perspective is a minority view worldwide.

In fact, according to a global study by the Pew Research Center, up to 84 percent of the world's population is religiously affiliated, and an even greater number profess belief in God or a universal spirit. That's almost everyone on earth!

But how *does Religions for Peace* get, for example, a Catholic, a Buddhist, a Muslim, a Hindu, and an indigenous shaman to work together to make a real difference? The answer, according to *Religions for Peace* is to focus squarely on the underlying values those diverse traditions can easily agree on: love, compassion, generosity, justice, dignity.

As the saying goes: "There is one Light but many lamps." Let's hear how some leaders experience that Sacred Light, and how it drives their work.

Dr. William Vendley: So, the Sacred is precisely not an object. It's extremely intimate. And yet the Sacred is calling out everywhere and at all times.

HOST: That's Dr. William Vendley, a committed Catholic who served as Secretary General of *Religions for Peace* from 1994 to 2019. Many credit him with developing the Shared Sacred Flourishing framework.

Dr. William Vendley: And across all of history, the human family has opened itself and is the opening perhaps to the Sacred. It's extremely intimate. And so, our traditions have developed a language for this experience, that at the very heart of the Sacred, there is...something like love.

But we don't try to define the Sacred. We turn to what are called the religious traditions to open themselves to that experience and to see how that ...grounds them in a kind of solidarity for all of us. I'm speaking about... something so deep, so foundational, it can hold us in our differences."

HOST: To help us relate, Dr. Vendley invites us to imagine holding a very young baby in our arms.

Dr. William Vendley: You're... holding that little baby just as you were held. And you're cooing at this baby. It's pre-verbal. (It) can't say a single word. But suddenly, there is this... radiant smile. A smile that knows that it is known and knows that it is recognized. There is a fancy word for that, which is "mutuality."

HOST: For Dr. Vendley, that primal experience powerfully echoes the depth of connection he often experiences with interfaith colleagues in the field.

Dr. William Vendley: When the religious people from different traditions truly open themselves to each other – and they often have to because they often find themselves working together in the most desperate situations our human family is in – that smile reemerges. Love recognizes love and is very happy to encounter it wherever it is. That depth is a foundational bed of what it means to be human, and finally, to be spiritual.

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HOST: This connection resonates deeply with Judith Simmer-Brown, the retired Distinguished Professor of Tibetan Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue at Colorado's Naropa University. And she notes that, unlike mainstream Western traditions, the concept of sacred in Buddhism does not involve "God" *per se*.

Dr. Judith Simmer-Brown: In my tradition of Buddhism, we're not talking about some external Supreme Being outside of our experience. In Buddhism, it's all very much within our experience, and it imbues our lives with a sense of purpose and meaning and connection with all beings: human beings, animals, subtle microscopic creatures as well, and even with trees and rocks. And the meaning of existence is realizing that connection; that we are all depending on each other for every moment, every breath we take.

We're dependent on our ancestors, we're dependent on every farmer who provides us food, we're dependent upon the plants that we're eating, the meat that we're eating, if we're eating meat. That sense of embeddedness in life and existence is what the Sacred really means.

HOST: That closely mirrors Rabbi David Rosen's Shared Sacred Worldview and what Shared Sacred Flourishing on every level means to him. Based in Jerusalem, Rabbi Rosen is the former Chief Rabbi of Ireland and now serves as both *Religions for Peace* International Co-President and Special Interfaith Advisor to Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi.

Rabbi David Rosen: And what distinguishes this flourishing is precisely the Sacred: to cherish that and to hold that up and say our particular traditions are seeking to affirm that transcendence, that divine meaning to our existence.

HOST: Rabbi Rosen contrasts the Shared Sacred Flourishing model to global crises with a secular, self-interested approach to flourishing based in economics, politics or the law.

Rabbi David Rosen: A good secular humanist might behave as well – if not better! – than someone who describes him or herself as a religionist. The difference is if I love you only because it's good for me, then I might not love you tomorrow. I can decide that it's no longer in my interest. And I'm afraid with regards to the world at large, that's generally the way people behave.

But the fundamental idea of the Sacred is that I need to behave towards you in the right way. To love you as yourself, precisely because there is the divine within you as within me.

HOST: To see how that plays out on a global scale today, consider the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which all 193 member states pledged to fulfill by 2030. Those goals include an end to poverty and hunger, universal access to clean water and water management, climate action, and sustainable work and economic growth for everyone.

But in Dr. Francis Kuria's opinion, higher income numbers, for example, don't guarantee a happy life.

Dr. Francis Kuria: You could have a high income and very unhappy people.

HOST: But one might ask: when it comes right down to it, what is the meaningful difference between a secular and a shared sacred framework for development, as long as both methods feed hungry people for example, and give them clean air and meaningful work? Dr. Vendley conducted an experiment about the UN's Sustainable Development Goals using artificial intelligence, or AI.

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Dr. William Vendley: And I asked, “what is the implicit worldview of those goals?” Well, very predictably, it offered a very materialistic, highly measurable vision of what our worldview would be. There is no word “goodness,” “beauty,” “courage,” “honesty,” or “repentance,” let alone “the Sacred.” Those words don’t exist in the entire development plan of the UN Sustainable Development goals.

HOST: Next, Dr. Vendley fed the AI an outline of sacred universal values shared by nine major world religions and told it to combine that worldview with the UN’s divinity-free framework.

Dr. William Vendley: Well, all that was articulated in the secular worldview was retained, but the expansion was extraordinary. The expansion of the human heart, the deepest range of conscience, the profoundest reaches of our moral impulses and responsibilities, the radiant beauty of the earth, all become resplendently displayed, not only to realize those goals, but to expand those goals into what it means to be a realized person, and what it means to become a really good society.

HOST: Empathy is a natural human emotion that is often confused with compassion, but Dr. Judith Simmer-Brown says that just feeling bad for others won’t stop wars or bind anyone’s wounds. For her, compassion is entirely different.

Dr. Judith Simmer-Brown: Compassion is a spark which leads to action. And it's defined as feeling someone else's pain but also being motivated to do something to relieve it.

HOST: And experience shows that that spark can translate into effective action when interfaith religious leaders inspire their faith communities to organize care.

HOST: Throughout the Bosnian War of 1992 to 1995, for example, Muslim, Catholic, Serbian Orthodox and other religious leaders stood together to publicly condemn the violence. And in Sarajevo, where Jews, Muslims and Christians had lived in harmony together for centuries, the Jewish community helped provide food and medicine for everyone, regardless of faith or ethnicity. And Dr. Vendley and *Religions for Peace* also played an important part.

Dr. William Vendley: I helped create an interreligious council during the war. Religious institutions and moral networks were mobilized to address drivers of conflict in ways political mechanisms couldn't. Secular tools are vital, but sometimes slow. Spiritual resources are immediate.

HOST: Dr. Vendley recalls a moment during the conflict that vividly highlighted for him what “spiritual resources” are.

Dr. William Vendley: I’m talking about a man whose home has been burned, his child has been murdered, his wife may have been raped. How is this person able to reconcile with pain that is almost unbearable pain? There isn’t a secular answer to that question, frankly, in my experience. So, when you’re pushed to the edge, you do find that people do have the capacity to bear the unbearable and to forgive the unforgiveable, and to care far beyond their self-interest, to be loving and benevolent and take care of each other, and they typically source this in the sacred itself. Spiritual capital is not marketable, but it reaches the core of suffering and enables reintegration where cash alone may not.

HOST: Another place where *Religions for Peace* fostered interfaith was in Sierra Leone during its eleven-year civil war, by organizing rescue and reintegration efforts for kidnapped children who had been forced to become soldiers.

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Dr. William Vendley: I brought 50 women of faith — Muslim and Christian — into the rebel strongholds, completely unarmed. And the women requested from the rebel leaders to give us 50 children. And they delivered them to the president. This was a very profound interfaith possibility. There were brilliant diplomats. But it was basically because the faith communities crossed all the lines and speak for all. And so, they became the trusted group. The rebels trusted them and the government trusted them.

HOST: I asked Dr. Vendley what enabled the rebels to open their hearts to free the children.

Dr. William Vendley: What they were doing was availing themselves of their own deepest their own sacred resources and using them as a bridge across an extremely divided populace with profound suffering. They were appealing – self-consciously and radically - to their respective religious heritages as a kind of strength and power to go beyond their fears. These are spiritual assets grounded in *plural* experiences of the Sacred.

HOST: A Shared Sacred Worldview can also make all the difference after a conflict ends. Faith-based efforts were critical in healing Rwanda following the horrific genocide of 1994.

Rwanda's Grand Mufti and the country's Anglican archbishop formed an interfaith platform that helped support many healing and reconciliation efforts, including trauma therapy groups, prisoner reintegration programs and interfaith 'Reconciliation Villages' where perpetrators and survivors lived and worked together to rebuild.

Dr. Kuria says such projects, combined with ongoing government support led to a Shared Flourishing framework that continues to this day.

Dr. Francis Kuria: The country has rebuilt itself from genocide because the country decided to embrace forgiveness. And there are many other examples of virtue that have uplifted society. It's all grounded in love, in compassion, in mercy and our ability to see in each other's eyes the Sacred.

HOST: Interfaith dialog also works on a hyper-local scale. Dr. Kuria experienced it firsthand as a teenage orphan in Kenya, where he was sent to a school that actively fostered interfaith understanding. Every week, a small group of students would give a presentation about their faith in personal terms to the entire school.

Dr. Francis Kuria: I was sharing about the Catholic faith. And I had a Muslim come (speak) after me, and an evangelical Christian. And the three of us then met! And sometimes we could discuss all night about our faith and what it means and what it says, and it created a lifelong bond. When I did my wedding, my Best Man was a Muslim! Which is very unusual among Catholics!

The fact that I am a Catholic, I am a Christian, doesn't mean the Muslim is wrong, or that they are evil or anything. And you understand that there are things that are unresolved!

HOST: Dr. Kuria points to one major theological divide he and his Muslim friend had to navigate.

Dr. Francis Kuria: For him, if someone has been a Muslim and becomes a Christian, they are put to death. I don't agree with that, but you just have to see the beauty of their own religion and the practice of their own religion.

HOST: Those early interfaith relationships helped set Dr. Kuria on a life path dedicated to interfaith solidarity.

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Dr. Francis Kuria: It's the constant sharing, the constant nourishing, the constant flourishing that we have had that gives me the grace to believe that it is possible that multi-religious mechanisms can bring us together."

HOST: Rabbi Rosen experienced a similar breakthrough when he helped establish diplomatic relations between Israel and the Vatican after centuries of official Church anti-Semitism and mistrust on both sides. At the end of their diplomatic rapprochement between the two states, the Church recognized the Jewish faith as its "elder brother." It was a union between their faiths, and the universal values they share.

Rabbi David Rosen: When the universal is lost, then the particular becomes dangerous. And when the particular is lost, the universal tends to be rather empty, flaccid and therefore not rooted and not stable. So, the creative balance between the universal and the particular is essential.

That's why the interfaith movement is so important today. To be able to bring people out of their shells, out of their cocoons, into an encounter with people of other cultures and other faith traditions. The more we can encounter that diversity, the healthier our society will be.

HOST: A final, candid note: religion heals when it is humble and accountable to others and to the Sacred it purports to value. Leaders must use their authority to protect the vulnerable, not to entrench privilege. That requires transparent processes, interfaith checks, and the willingness to call out abuse when it appears. Again, Dr. Francis Kuria of *Religions for Peace*.

Dr. Francis Kuria: The misuse of religion is... a constant threat to religion and to peace in the world. We do have many instances where religion is used for exclusionary purposes and political purposes. And it is harmful to the religion, to the followers of religion and to the Shared Sacred Flourishing.

HOST: There are many powerful and effective ways for the faithful to put their sacred values into action right now. Senior religious leaders can mentor local clergy in dialogue and mediation skills, lend moral weight to reconciliation efforts, and help scale successful local models.

Everyday listeners can promote Shared Sacred Flourishing as well. Consider convening a brief interfaith conversation, funding a small women-led community project, or hosting a public cleanup project that protects nature.

Whatever you do and wherever you go, look for the Sacred within everyday life and before long, you just might notice the sacred looking right back at you. Then consider what to do with your time. For *Religions for Peace*, I'm your Adam Phillips. Thank you for listening.

Bishop Kari Mangrud Alvsvåg: That does it for the first episode of the *Religions for Peace* podcast series. Thanks to our guests Dr. Francis Kuria, Dr. William Vendley, Judith Simmer-Brown, and Rabbi David Rosen.

Next month and throughout this series, we'll look deeper into the Shared Sacred Flourishing paradigm, guided by religious leaders from diverse faiths and from around the world.

Our podcast page features a widget to leave us a recorded message – please use it and join our discussion online, too, on Facebook, where we are posting a summary of each episode and welcome your comments. This is [Bishop Kari Mangrud Alvsvåg](#) with *Religions for Peace*. See you next time!