

UN High Level Thematic Debate

Tolerance and Reconciliation: Fostering Peaceful, Inclusive Societies and Countering Violent Extremism.

22 April 2015

Brothers and Sisters, allow me to begin with the Sikh Greeting

Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh,

Tolerance and Reconciliation

At the outset, I would like to gratefully thank the President of the General Assembly, the UN Secretary-General and the UN High Representative of Alliance of Civilizations for convening this historical meeting, bringing religious leaders to the UN to join forces to overcome violent extremism.

Religion in the contemporary world seems to be merely tolerated by a large segment of humanity. Its dignity and honour needs to be genuinely restored and lovingly re-established. Religion is a useful resource that can provide unique solutions to the very heart of questions that we are addressing at this high level thematic debate.

Apathy towards others is unacceptable, just as intolerance unquestionably is demeaning. The Divine does not merely tolerate us, because divine love is unconditional. Tolerance and acceptance, hitherto advocated and currently practised, needs to be elevated to a higher bar of respect, love, even sacrifice.

Reconciliation necessitates bringing conflicting sides together to enter into genuine dialogue, to build respect and acceptance. Reconciliation is inextricably linked to

compassion and forgiveness for insuring sustainable peace. Religious communities are often at the forefront of enacting forms of non-violence and are a vital resource. Religion repeatedly surfaces in reconciliation projects and strategies. This is necessarily so, because all the virtues and values emanate from the Divine.

Fostering Peaceful, Inclusive Societies

There are excellent stipulated standards for human beings within sacred texts and religious traditions. These comprise the virtues and values of compassion, mercy, forgiveness, truthfulness, selflessness, humility, and most of all, love, for fostering peaceful inclusive societies. Conversely, lust, rage, greed, are frailties and negativities which religion shields, guards and warns humans against.

We are holistic beings with a body, mind and soul. It is only through empowering the mind of the individual through good values and virtues that it is possible to foster peaceful inclusive societies.

The mind is an immensely powerful tool with the capacity to be either one's best friend or indeed one's worst enemy. The mind has infinite potential to do good as well as enormous ability to propel one towards greed, cruelty, lies, selfishness, arrogance, hate, belittling and condemnation of others. It is the cultivation and empowerment of the mind that creates the condition for inner peace from which will flow outer peace in the family, the community, the nation-state and the entire world.

The preamble to the constitution of UNESCO reinforces and endorses the capacity of the mind stating, “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed”.

Prayer from the deepest depth of the heart , with utter humility, is a powerful plea that assists and reforms the mind. Imbued with Divine attributes, devoid of ego, the connection between the Divine and creation and its connectivity and interdependence becomes apparent, leading to the realisation that in diversity, there is unity and in unity there is strength.

Countering Violent Extremism

Fire cannot be extinguished with more fire. If we want peace, we should prepare for peace and not war. Retaliation leads to a vicious cycle of escalating violence, albeit at times, defence may be an essential part of combatting violent extremism. Nevertheless, compassion and forgiveness have to be maintained at all times.

Extremists select and chose isolated verses of religious texts, which through misinterpretation and misquotation are used to spread hate and intolerance. In order to counter these challenges and threats they pose, multiple strategies to counter violent extremism are necessary. Religious practitioners and scholars need to assist in correcting misinterpretations and misquotations that lead to radicalisation and violent extremism.

The empowerment of the human mind through good value-led education is also an integral part of any such strategy.

There is a need for more sustained meaningful engagement between governments, civil society, religious leaders and the communities they represent. All these relevant stakeholders must be permanently connected and integrated into the work of the UN system on the basis of equitable and effective partnerships. This would entail reform and structural change to the UN's engagement with religion and religious leaders, perhaps best achieved through an Interreligious Advisory Council to the UN Secretary-General. Collectively, these would provide unparalleled capacity to foster a disposition of inclusivity and make available conceptual resources that have hitherto been marginalised.

Values driven education must drive the change required to meet the challenges of violent extremism. In Birmingham UK, we have developed three such exemplars that can foster harmony and inclusivity, local and globally.

1. Nishkam Schools

First, Nishkam Sikh ethos, multifaith schools, prepare children to embrace the changing scenario of the third millennium. They impart moral and spiritual dispositions, together with values and virtues from the great religious traditions, essential for establishing the foundations of our future global citizens.

2. The Charter for Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Second, the Charter for Forgiveness and Reconciliation is an initiative to develop a founding document for a movement to foster forgiveness and reconciliation in private and in public life. The vision of the Charter is that the act of forgiving is vital if healing and reconciliation is to take place, as part of our collective efforts to seek restorative justice and sustainable peace.

3. The Museum of World Religions MWR (UK)

Third, is the proposed development of a Museum of World Religions (UK) which will bring together living religious traditions from around the world as the indispensable inspirations of cultures and civilisations. These traditions in our global village can no longer exist, or be considered, in isolation. Today, they are increasingly interdependent, interconnected, seeking serious collaboration and dialogue.

Brothers and sisters, please allow me to share a brief prayer of Guru Nanak, from the Sikh tradition.

The whole world is suffering; engulfed in flames of many destructive forces primarily lust, revenge, greed and ego. We plead to you God through your mercy, please protect and save us. No matter which door or sanctuary or place of worship we come from, take us into your fold and refuge. Pray, shelter and protect us.

Thank you.

Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh