Faith and Spirituality: Building a Culture of Peace

Mohammad Abdalla

Imam at the Kuraby Mosque, Brisbane

and Lecturer at Griffith University, Brisbane

Ladies and Gentlemen

A culture of peace is not an impossible dream. A harmonious society is thus a society in which everyone shares a *culture* of peace rather than one of violence. Violence is not strictly limited to places where people are fighting. Violence can also be found in social inequality, discrimination towards women, poverty, the rejection of others because of their differences and unreasonable use of the environment. Building a culture of peace thus means developing, on a daily basis, the values, ways of thinking and attitudes that are in keeping with equality, tolerance, sharing, generosity and respect.

A culture of peace means making peace a way of being, doing and living in a society, establishing it profoundly in our attitudes and mentalities. As Nehru described this by saying:

> Peace is not a relationship of nations. It is a condition of mind brought about by a serenity of soul. Peace is not merely the absence of war. It is also a state of mind. Lasting peace can come only to peaceful people.

Building a culture of peace does not, therefore, apply solely to distant, warring regions, but also to our own society. Building a culture of peace means going farther than simply putting an end to conflict. Peace is not only the absence of direct physical violence and war, but also the elimination of structural violence, which is the consequence of institutions, and processes that diminish the material **and** spiritual quality of human life. By seeking to better understand the social, political, cultural, economic, and civic structures whose deterioration can lead to

violence and social upheaval, we can contribute to the identification of and support for measures to restore and enhance peace. Peace refers to the inner freedom and spiritual elevation of the individual. The place of peace lies within our spiritual domain. It is there to be discovered and developed. Peace is not only the absence of war, but also the presence of justice and freedom.

Most violent conflicts today occur between groups within national boundaries, making them inter-group in character and intra-national in scope. With the end of the proxy-based wars during the Cold War era, the rapid eruption of smaller scale, more localised armed conflicts ensued. The breakdown of central authority in some states have propelled people to seek security through identification with a group that may be based on ethnicity, clan, religion, geographic affiliation or a mix of these. While religion may be a direct source of inter-group violence, it appears that religious conflicts have more to do with how a people and culture define themselves than with religious doctrine. Once religion is aroused and politicised, they tend to be obstinate. Thus, the manipulation of religious beliefs by certain vested groups often spurs the beginning, as well as the intensification, of conflict.

But is there a link between the violence that targets individuals and communities in one country and discrimination against people of a particular race, colour, or religion in another country?

Often these are the causes of economic injustice, political double standards and social oppression. These are important causes but not the only ones. Intolerance is a factor in the absence of a culture of peace.

Intolerance ignited most wars, fuelled religious persecutions and violent ideological confrontations. But the question is: Is intolerance inherent in human nature? Is it undefeatable? Can tolerance be learned? How can communities and states deal with intolerance without infringing on individual freedoms? How can

they foster individual codes of conduct, without harsh laws and without policing people's behaviour? How can peaceful pluralism, multiculturalism or unity in diversity be achieved?

Tolerance is respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human. It is fostered by **knowledge, openness, communication, and freedom of thought, conscience and belief.** Tolerance is harmony in difference. It is not only a moral duty; it is also a political and legal requirement. Tolerance, the virtue that makes peace possible, contributes to the replacement of the culture of war and violence by a culture of peace.

Tolerance is not concession, condescension, or indulgence. Tolerance is, above all, an active attitude prompted by recognition of the universal human rights and fundamental freedom of others. In no circumstance can it be used to justify infringements of these fundamental values. Tolerance is to be exercised by individuals, groups and States. In Islam tolerance is also called: "تسامح" (forgiveness), "حلم" (forbearance), "عفو" (pardon) or "صفح" (overlooking).

That is why it is important to realise that just as religion may be central to many disputes and is often used to justify and fuel violence, religious traditions have important resources for addressing conflicts that often divide peoples and nations. The resolution of human cultural, ethnic and religious antagonisms often rests on the emphasis of the valuable contribution religion can make, as a peace-making agent in conflicts, to increasing understanding and harmony between conflicting parties and advancing the notion and importance of tolerance.

Whereas religious beliefs and misinterpretations thereof have increasingly fuelled conflict, at the same time the constructive role of religious institutions and communities in providing peaceful paths towards resolution is very significant. Every religion has an outer form or shell, and an inner essence or core - or a faith

and spirituality. The outer shell may consist of rites, rituals, ceremonies, beliefs, myths and doctrines. These vary from one religion to another. But there is an inner core common to all religions: the universal teachings of morality and charity, of a disciplined and pure mind full of love, compassion, good will and tolerance. It is this common denominator that religious leaders ought to emphasize, and that religious adherents ought to practice. If proper importance is given to the essence of all religions and greater tolerance is shown for their superficial aspects, conflict can be minimized. Despite the diversity in ethos, religious traditions share commonalities - the promotion of mutual respect for one's neighbours regardless of their race, ethnicity, creed, culture, sex and age. These are part of faith and spirituality.

A secularised world where the principles of faith and spirituality are not being practised is a dangerous world. Look at the 20th century - the bloodiest century in the entire human history is a secular century. Hitler was secular; World War I and World War II were secular wars. All the wars that have been fought in our lifetime have been secular wars. There have been religious problems that worsen but generally the problem has been human beings. The problem is not religion, religion becomes an excuse. And it's a wonderful excuse because obviously if God says it's ok it feels a lot better doing it, so there is that danger.

If we remove religion from humanity then there will be personal constraints. The only constraint is totalitarianism. Once internal spiritual constraints are removed - which allow people to have a sense that there are moral implications to my actions - once we remove that and it simply becomes positivistic law where the state tells us what's right and wrong and there is no God to do that, where there's no religious cosmology to do that – then anything goes - that's the bottom line. That's what Nietzsche warned us over one hundred years ago - that remove God and all is permissible.

Therefore understanding the role of religion, as a source of conflict, healer and promoter of peace, is indispensable in promoting consciousness, as well as in fostering a notion of a human community. It is an enabling strategy that acknowledges and utilises the role of religion in providing a conducive environment for parties to empathise with the forces on both sides of the conflict. The study of the religious aspects of contemporary conflicts and the role of religious catalysts in moving disputes toward peaceful settlement is central in the promotion and realisation of a culture of peace.

But without spirituality religious practice may lead to zealous behavior that often manifests itself in an ugly form. Spirituality is most needed in the building of a culture of peace. It is not theology or intellectual speculation (which is what religion can mean); spirituality works in different ways from them, and has the purpose of slow but profound transformation from frustration and anger with situations in the world to equanimity that is not passive.   An example of spirituality is Prophet Muhammad's saying:

> The strong person is not one who defeats others but one who controls him or her self at the time of anger

This is important to realize because many peace advocates and advocates of other just causes are almost as angry as the people whose point of view they are trying to overcome. There is something deeply flawed about this situation; confrontation usually does not lead to much real change and many who are involved in just causes eventually become weary and leave, while those whom they confront do not change much either.

Anger or aggression is one of the most pervasive emotions experienced by humans, no matter what their persuasion or cause. It is also one of the most toxic and counter-productive, even if exercised in pursuit of the "right" cause. Spiritual disciplines can lead to replacing anger with equanimity, making effective and

lifelong involvement in the pursuit of peace and justice much more possible. While it might be interesting to hope that all parties involves in disputes would be amenable to such disciplines, the benefits of spirituality for the person involved in such work is immense, recognizing that at least we can always work with our own minds to become more peaceful and effective. The Dalai Lama once said:

> World peace must develop from inner peace. Peace is not just the absence of violence but also the manifestation of human compassion.

The Native American proverb says:

> It is no longer good enough to Cry peace, we must Act peace, live peace and Live In Peace.

Each of the major world religious traditions, having endured the test of time, contains a set of spiritual values, which are relevant, indeed necessary, for building a culture of peace in the twenty-first century. Collectively these value systems provide an inner, often invisible, spiritual discipline that can allow individuals to stay on course in turbulent times. These values are necessary to enable a culture of peace to thrive and grow. These values are: truthfulness, trust, humility, forgiveness, compassion, thankfulness, service, and peace, to name just a few.

To establish a culture of peace we need to consider two important points:

Firstly: Other cultures and religions should not be misrepresented. Educational institutions, and media outlets should be held responsible not to propagate or perpetuate hate against any group of people and their recognized faiths and values. Islam, and the Muslims, unfortunately, are still the target of stereotyping and misrepresentation. Last year, the United Nations' Commission on Human Rights adopted a resolution expressing its deep concern regarding the stereotyping

of religion, particularly Islam, as a faith that has been "wrongly associated with human-right violation, and with terrorism.

Secondly: e need interfaith relations and dialogues. Of course we have core differences in our religions but we must try to understand each other. As we learn about our own faith, traditions, and communities, we should also learn about others. Understanding others changes us. By understanding we learn the areas of similarities as well as differences. We can learn the nature of differences and the extent of our differences. Concern for the well being of others should stimulate our efforts to reach a common ground for action. Each group must encourage and facilitate a shared responsibility to create a more sensitive, and welcoming environment for our diverse people

Last month I attended a five days executive programme on the topic "Religion: Conflict or Peace?" in Thailand. The sixty representatives of the World's major religions accepted that success of peace making depends on the social cohesion established at the grass root level. They postulated 'Ten Commandments' that may help in building a culture of peace. Allow me to end my talk my sharing these with you.

1. Establish good neighbourly relations between and among local communities and religious leaders. (That is: attend their festivals, weddings, celebrations etc)

2. These relations must be transformed into community mechanisms – partnership between and among religious leaders

3. Develop a capacity to get involved in humanitarian interventions as in issues pertaining to refugees

4. Establish creditability with local communities

5. Act as mediators at the local levels, with the police, local government and so on

6. Become a locus for welcoming and healing the sufferings of victims and those in need

7. Become a bridge between communitas

8. Prepare your own community to accept making agreements with other communities

9. Capacity of religious and communities in accepting post-conflict agreements

10. Being able to institutionalise rules 1 to 9 by becoming peacemakers

11.