

RELIGIONS FOR PEACE BANGLADESH
SEMINAR: WORLD PEACE THROUGH INTERFAITH AND
INTRAFaITH DIALOGUE

**The Role Of Religious Leaders In The Creation Of Peace, Social
Cohesion And Religious Dialogue In The Context Of 21st Century
Asia**

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DHAKA, BANGLADESH

NOVEMBER 2018

THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN THE CREATION OF PEACE, SOCIAL COHESION AND RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN THE CONTEXT OF 21st CENTURY ASIA

Today we live in a world of greater risk, limited controllability and uncertain predictability. At the same time, the 21st century is said to become the Asia-Pacific century. And well it may. But what form will it take? Certainly in recent decades most Asia Pacific nation states have made significant economic progress, not least Bangladesh. The Asia-Pacific region also contains a plurality of spiritual and religious traditions, languages and ethnicities but it also contains a plurality of poverties despite the very considerable progress Asian countries have made in overcoming extreme poverty. But there are hotspot impoverished countries as there are hotspots in every country e.g. rural village poverty in China and India, the Aboriginal communities in Australia.

The Global Growth of Cities

Especially pertinent to Asia has been the global growth of cities for global cities are the hubs or nodes in the processes of globalization. And the last decade has seen a very historic tipping point – for the first time ever in human history, more people are living in cities than in rural areas. By 2050 70 per cent of all people on this earth will live in urban areas. Asia is presently home to half the world's urban population, and to 66 of the 100 fastest growing urban areas, of which 33 are in China alone. While most growth will occur in cities and towns, there is also the fact of the megacities (10+ million people) – there are currently 21 with 10 in Asia: Tokyo (36.5M), Delhi (21.7M), Mumbai (19.7M), Shanghai (16.3M), Kolkata (15.3M), Dhaka (14.3M), Karachi (12.8M), Beijing (12.2M), Manila (11.4M) and Osaka-Kobe (11.3M). This seminar is thus taking place in the global megacity of Dhaka, the sixth largest city in Asia.

For global cities, the key questions are: how do we make our cities more liveable and more sustainable? How can we harness the new knowledges and the new technologies to make the cities cleaner, richer and less dangerous, more connected and more cohesive? Religious communities are now centred more in cities than in villages, and it is certain that the dilemmas regarding religious community life and interreligious tensions will be played out in cities. And cities can be very dangerous places. And the quality of religious leadership will be a critical element in the maintenance of peace, social stability and social cohesion for religion at its best contributes to a nation's social capital. As a consequence, religious leaders will be under greater scrutiny and accountability, and in this paper I want to address the functions of religious leaders in this complex global world.

The Role of Religious Leaders in a Globalizing Asia-Pacific Region

The relationship of religious leaders with the pursuit of peace and human well-being is a vexed one. What is the role of religion, religious communities and their faith leaders regarding peace, dialogue and human well-being? What is their role in improving our cities? What is the role of religion in the protection of women and children? What is its role in the welcoming and integration of migrants and in creating a culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse society? What then is the role of religious communities and their leaders in meeting the different spiritual, emotional, welfare and physical needs of immigrants arriving and recently arrived in a destination country and in helping to maintain a socially cohesive and interreligiously harmonious country?

It seems that religious communities and their leaders have seven functions in addressing the challenges and complexities of 21st century Asia in the pursuit of human well-being within the human destinies framework regarding at-risk and vulnerable groups:

1. To act as bearers and witnesses to the great religious traditions in the world of today

The very first and perhaps most important point that needs to be made is that in today's world, one cannot be authentically religious unless one is also interreligious. To be religious = to be interreligious. Almost all countries are religiously diverse. For a nation state to be and remain socially cohesive, the quality of religious leadership must be high. For this to occur, religious leaders, whether Muslim imams, Christian priests, Buddhist monks, Hindu priests or religious nuns, need to be professionally educated and trained not merely in the religious or theological sciences of their own tradition but also in the social sciences. They need to have the professional knowledge, skills, attitudes and experience in dealing with a religiously pluralist context. Ultimately all authentic religious traditions are oriented to the other, whether the divine other or the neighbour other. Otherwise, they become perversions of religion.

2. To serve the spiritual welfare and pastoral care of their religious communities, including those who have arrived as migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and as stateless people

Religious leaders throughout the world are highly experienced in ministering to their community members through their mosques, gurdwaras, synagogues, churches and temples. But they also have a special responsibility for those on the move. As the first priority, religious communities in the receiving countries need to provide the spiritual and community support for their migrant co-religionists in overcoming the very considerable stresses of the adaptation or adjustment process. In the area of believing, religious traditions have the capability to interpret religiously the migration experience to the believing migrant and to provide the religious rituals of the particular tradition. For example, within the three Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, migration is at the very core of each tradition when Abram migrated from Ur of the Chaldees in modern Iraq to the promised land of Israel. In Christianity, the child Jesus and his family were both refugees and return refugees when they fled to the safety of Egypt. And the flight of the Prophet is central to Islam.

As part of the bonding and belonging process, religious leaders in the host countries can establish special places of worship in mosques, churches, synagogues and temples specially for individual immigrant and refugee communities so as they can be spiritually ministered to in their own languages. Then they can feel the sense of belonging to a transhistorical and transnational group that solidifies their collective self-esteem and identification with a group of compatriots undergoing the same stresses of adaptation and integration.

In the adjustment process there are very significant hurdles to be jumped in finding accommodation, finding furniture, finding employment and finding a suitable school for any children. Religious communities can be very helpful during the first months and initial years of settlement in providing the emotional, social and financial support and helping to find things like a home, a job and so on.

3. To collaborate with governments and their own communities in working for peace in their own country, monitoring and critiquing government actions or lack of action in constructing a civil society

The third function relates to the role of religious leaders in working creatively and constructively with their governments but also having the right and the duty to be critical of governments when that is appropriate. Religious leaders are very close to the people in their local communities, and often it is they who first identify emerging problems and issues that governments need to address. In this, they are exercising a prophetic and monitoring role as well as working for peace within their own country. Analysis of the Global Peace Index data suggests that there are eight key indicators of a peaceful nation called ‘the eight pillars of peace’:

- (a) a well-functioning government
- (b) a sound business environment
- (c) an equitable distribution of resources
- (d) an acceptance of the human rights of others
- (e) good relationships with neighbouring nations
- (f) free flow of information
- (g) high level of human capital and
- (h) low levels of corruption.

This implies advocacy by religious leaders in pressuring governments to develop appropriate policies and practical programs. Hence, this aspect of religion is to be counter-cultural in the sense of challenging governments and societies to respect human rights, to ensure freedom of religion where the government treats all religious traditions equally and with positive neutrality and to implement good practice towards minorities, whether religious, ethnic or sexual. As we all well know, governments may be slow or lazy in responding to the needs of particular minority groups or vulnerable communities, or it may not be in their political interests to show care.

Such program initiatives need to be framed within a broader policy framework. What does a pluralist social and economic policy look like? Such a policy would be built within the framework of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights upon the two principles of (1) commitment to one’s own country and (2) equality of opportunity for all, and the three underpinning dimensions of (a) maintenance and development of one’s cultural, linguistic and religious heritage (b) equal and equitable access to the nation’s social and economic resources and (c) economic efficiency or productive diversity in utilizing and improving the knowledge and skills of all for the social and economic well-being of the nation.

4. To work for social cohesion and interreligious harmony within multireligious societies.

As the fourth function, religious leaders have a special responsibility for social cohesion and interreligious harmony. Management of multifaith diversity is aiming at social cohesion. Religious leaders in particular need to be well-educated and trained in how to exercise quality leadership in culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse societies. There is no agreed definition of social cohesion but generally descriptions revolve around a shared vision held by a well-functioning core group or community that acts in a continuous and interminable process of achieving social harmony. Scholars across the world base their notion of social cohesion on five dimensions:

- (1) creating a **sense of belonging** incorporating shared values, trust and psychological identification with the nation state and with the religious group. Here, the issue of citizenship is important –

citizenship should be made reasonably easy to obtain after 3 – 5 years for immigrants and refugees.

- (2) ensuring **social justice and equity** in terms of access to government services and funding, including special programs to meet the special needs of at-risk, vulnerable groups, including multiple opportunities to develop themselves and their talents through educational and occupational pathways.
- (3) encouraging **participation** by all majority and minority at-risk groups in civic, political and social life as part of creating this sense of belonging. Another aspect is that civic leaders as well as members of parliament need to attend the many varied ethnic and religious community functions as part of creating the sense of welcoming and participation that lie at the heart of social cohesion and as part of interfaith hospitality.
- (4) bringing about **acceptance** of newcomers and minorities and working against racism and discrimination. Religious communities ought be “welcoming agencies” reaching out to migrants and other longstanding minorities.
- (5) forging a **sense of worth** incorporating people’s general happiness, life satisfaction and future expectations, all having a sense of their personal worth as individuals, generally happy that hard work has brought rewards, generally satisfied with their lives and with achievable and realistic expectations.

5. To have a special responsibility for vulnerable groups, particularly women and children in their protection and education, including to help facilitate the formation of self-help organizations for these at-risk groups

As we have already emphasized, authentic religion, if it remains committed to its own beliefs and behaviours, must always remain protective of the most vulnerable. Women and children are among the most vulnerable in every society as victims of patriarchalism, criminality, sexual attacks and under-education. In their sense of care, religious leaders must insist on the human rights of women and children, resisting patriarchalism even within their own ranks, and insisting on the protection and full education of women and children.

Religious leaders, working with political and academic leaders, ought ask themselves: How can my religious community help deal with out-of-school children? How big a problem is child labour in our country and what can be done about it? To what extent is child sexual abuse a hidden problem in our society? Are there any females under 18 being married in our society, being forced into marriage with older men? To what extent is child trafficking present in our society? To what extent is there discrimination against women and girls in our society?

6. To educate one’s own religious community and to help educate the general community about the situation and needs of at-risk, vulnerable groups and about the danger and damage caused by racism, discrimination and social and physical neglect in terms of human rights and human well-being

Community education, even through the media, including the religious media, is also an important element of the protection of and advocacy for at risk groups and for the integration process of

minorities, migrants and refugees. The first responsibility of religious communities is to educate themselves about the issues regarding at risk groups, including the commissioning of research studies and sponsoring of consciousness-raising conferences. In particular, religious leaders have the direct responsibility of countering religious extremism, including false religious ideologies based on literalist or narrow interpretations of the sacred texts or readings.

But beyond each religious community, there is the requirement to educate the broader community. One special aspect of this is to see that the police are well-trained in interacting with minorities and at-risk groups, including newcomers, perhaps through the formation of a police interfaith advisory council.

7. **To help change the self-image of the nation as a growing diverse nation in cultural, linguistic and religious terms, seeing well-cared for and well-educated women and children as national assets and seeing the migrant and refugee newcomers also as assets**

The last function is related to a nation's self-image and self-perception as it evolves over the decades. Because of the improved social and economic progress achieved in most Asia Pacific countries as measured on the various indexes and the unprecedented movement of peoples on the move, nations are changing, and changing quite quickly. As this occurs, the national self-image has to evolve and expand to be inclusive of at-risk groups such as the disabled and the aged as well as the women and children, migrants and refugees. There will always be resistance to this as core heritage groups defend the nation's past and its core historical legacy. Essentially this task means re-interpreting the nation's past where there will always be some diversity contained in national histories and reframing its self-image in terms of authentic human values and regard for at risk minorities as well as in terms of greater diversity and cultural and spiritual richness as well as linking it into the global village.

The reframing process for any nation will evolve slowly over several decades. The wise person does not hurry history but history does have to be pushed in the right direction, implying that there are many different and additional ways of being Korean or Australian or Indian or Indonesian. Linked to this is to portray minorities and immigrants, not primarily as problems or intruders, but as positive assets. Religious leaders, trained in how to conduct themselves in a multifaith society, have a key role to play in their speeches and statements to help the nation evolve in its self-understanding as a more humane and diverse nation.

Conclusion

Religion is about the "4 Bs" of believing, bonding, behaving and belonging, reflecting its cognitive, emotional, moral and social dimensions. All religious groups, drawing from the deep wells of their own spiritualities and rituals, must forge their own understanding of helping the poor, the marginalized and the helpless in the 21st century. To address most of the issues regarding vulnerable groups, it probably will be necessary to cooperate with other religious groups through interfaith dialogue as a prelude to dialogue with political parties. Our spiritualities animate the best that is human, making ourselves channels of peace for great compassion, love and service as proclaimed by all the world's great traditions. Contrary to secularized Europe, Asia in all its diversity has an essentially religious and spiritual vision which is built around dialogue. Rational, creative and constructive dialogue leads to progress and reconciliation and understanding.

A fortnight ago on November 13th, 2018, in the Washington National Cathedral, one of the world's foremost Muslims gave a special address. King Abdullah II of Jordan had just been presented with the prestigious Templeton Prize for outstanding services to religion. He said that as Muslims "we are working on every continent to defend Islam against the malignant sub-minority who abuse our religion. And we do this not to please our friends, not to please the world, but to please God. And as long as there is life in our bodies and faith in our hearts, we will continue to do so.....The great commandments to love God and to love our neighbour are found again and again in Judaism, Christianity, Islam and other faiths around the world. It is a profound message, calling every one of us to look beyond ourselves. And this outward insight is the source and hope of all co-existence. And when we ask about hope and co-existence, no issue is more important than Jerusalem".

As my final point, the King has reminded us that Jerusalem must always remain the unifying City of Peace. For almost 100 years, the Vatican in Rome has been calling for Jerusalem to be made an international city open to the three Abrahamic faiths. The UN General Assembly ought proclaim Jerusalem to be an international city, sacred to Judaism, Christianity and Islam and open to all.

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