

## **Promoting Respect for Cultural Diversity in Conflict Resolution**

Blessed brothers and sisters, citizens of one planet, members of the human race, sparks of one and the same Divine flame, I am honoured, privileged and utterly humbled and overwhelmed to be invited to this auspicious gathering to share with you my reflections at this session on 'Peace, values and multiculturalism'. This session asks us to reflect on efforts aimed at increasing our understanding of multiculturalism and respect for diversity as well as encouraging dialogue between religions and cultures. It is vital to contextualise these efforts by considering the importance of ethics, the efficacy of the Millennium Development Goal's, the notion of tolerance, the cruelty of armed conflict, the ignorance of clashes of ideology, and the varying cultural norms that accompany globalisation. We need to incorporate sacred practices and beliefs into multicultural solutions. It is only in this way that we can devise effective strategies aimed at 'promoting respect for cultural diversity in conflict resolution'.

The need for such strategies is all the more important given that we live today in a world that is mired in violence and we are confronted by the ubiquitous, almost round the clock news concerning conflict and ensuing vengeance for the purpose of gratification through the use of merciless retaliatory force. Indeed, our planet's peace has been disturbed through violence, exploitation, conflict and insecurity. Such violence can often be accounted for by natural causes such as tsunamis, hurricanes and earthquakes. The human-induced causes of violence include terrorism, state terrorism, state policing, military conflict and various forms of warfare, major offensives, strategic assaults, riots, revolts, drug trafficking, forced labour, prostitution, human trafficking and even domestic

violence. Where violence is branded as a consequence of a particular motive or ideology, the response often escalates into a retaliatory and even greater violence that is characterised as necessary, justified or vital to deterrence.

We are surrounded by abject poverty and images of precious life ebbing away from those inflicted with incurable diseases such as HIV Aids. The images of coffins and more coffins, and indeed bodies without coffins in mass graves, of the victims of ethnic cleansing and of wars, are all too familiar. Our world is dominated by an array of exploitative actions that involve the economic sphere, the sexual, gender, children, the environment, and the military. We are engulfed by pervasive conflict within ourselves, within our families, and within communities locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. We are continually witnessing the misuse of both power and religion. Our rights have been infringed and violated. It is said that the enemy has become invisible and cannot be combated even by those with nuclear missiles or arsenals of sophisticated weaponry.

Despite our unprecedented closeness as a result of globalisation, we appear to be even further apart with an ever-growing sense of insecurity that is underpinned by a 'politics of fear' and suspicion for those who are not like 'us'. This crisis demands innovative strategies that are focused on transforming the mind-set of individuals. It is this transformative process that will change attitudes and so bring about fundamental change within our world.

Central to promoting respect for cultural diversity in conflict resolution is the recognition of the relationship between the individual and his or her place within the local, national and global communities. It is only through elevating the mind of the individual that it is possible to transform human society itself. 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 is both the nucleus of Divine power with infinite capability as well as the site of the hidden enemy that can propel one towards greed, cruelty, lies, selfishness, arrogance, hate and condemnation. It is the cultivation and empowerment of the spiritual mind that creates an inner peace which, when collectively marshalled, can lead to peace in the family, the community, the nation-state and the entire world. A spiritual mind is conditioned to undertake self-analysis which entails a process of self-regulation and accountability. It does not have to be subjected to policing and external forms of regulation. It seeks an alliance with the Divine that helps champion the cause of sustainable peace. Unconditional heartfelt prayer, with utter humility, is the greatest tool available to assist the mind. When imbued with Godly attributes, a connection between the Creator and the creation is established. This allows us to realise that, in diversity, there is unity.

It is this recognition that is empowering and a necessary precursor to changing the mind-set, to transforming attitudes and to effecting a new planetary consciousness which accepts that our well being and that of the planet is a shared collective and moral responsibility. In a world marked by globalisation, the very idea of a 'pure' culture seems improbable, even mythical. It is precisely when we begin to think of our culture as dynamic, and other cultures as static, that the potential for conflict intensifies.

Furthermore, to erroneously portray culture as encompassing faith, religion, spirituality and divinity is a folly – all these words convey different meanings to different people of disparate faiths at any given time. To address this seemingly insurmountable challenge requires focusing on humanity's commonality as opposed to highlighting the differences between cultures. Of course, humanity's commonality and infinite spiritual reservoir are comprised of the humane traits and values of compassion, mercy, forgiveness, truthfulness, selflessness, humility and, most of all, love.

In an infinite context, diversity is a natural phenomenon that needs to be respected whether it is cultural, civilisational or ideological. We must also humbly acknowledge that good and evil, spirituality and secularity, forms of diversity in their own right, co-exist within human nature. This apparent negativity should not threaten us. For, it is a 'variation' providing the spice of life and a test challenging us to exercise the right choices based on our God-given power of reason.

The Sikh Faith tells us that life on this globe fits within an ascending spiritual scale that ranges from pure matter to pure spirit, with pure matter being at the lowest end of the scale followed by vegetation, the animal kingdom, and human beings, and pure spirit being at the pinnacle, representing the Creator. What this colossal differentiation and multiplicity of the species indicates is the enormous complexity of the very planet that we inhabit and the remarkable way in which it evolves. This differentiation is a natural phenomenon and part of the uniqueness yet commonality of our species. If we recognise cultural diversity as a natural phenomenon, then the terms respect and tolerance that have

become somewhat of a secular catechism, often repeated as the mantra of multicultural societies, seem antithetical.

Diversity needs to be seen not through human eyes but through those of God. For the Creator, all creation is loved perfectly. Hence, the adage ‘everyone for himself or herself and God for us all’ is a reflection of human greed and God’s infinite kindness and benevolence. We can promote this respect for diversity through education and by establishing exemplary role models imbued with enlightenment and wisdom.

Even where diversity is portrayed as causing conflict, it should not be judged as such. It must be recognised that it is not diversity that is the problem but that it is prejudices about diversity that lead to misapprehension and ultimately conflict. Indeed, such prejudices are deeply embedded in the mind. Conflict arises when we violate someone’s honour and dignity and destroy both their self-esteem and self-respect. When individual and collective arrogance are present, they signal moral and ethical bankruptcy and lead to an imbalance of spirituality and secularity within us. Conflicts are manifestations of internal turmoil, arising as a consequence of inflicting injustices that are the product of mistrust and suspicion, exploitation and denigration. The root causes of conflict are also located in the very conditions that are being combated by the eight MDG’s. These MDG’s are no doubt a good blueprint for establishing sustainable societies. Nevertheless, they lack a humane face. Consequently, I suggest that there should be a ninth millennium goal – that of the development of the human mind and heart. Until and unless we empower and strengthen ourselves, both individually and collectively, it may

not be possible to realise our goals. The individual must be empowered if these goals are to be achieved.

All cultures share underlying ethical values that must be mobilised in order to attain a new planetary consciousness. Above all else, by placing global ethics on the agenda in unsettling times such as ours, there is hope that a shared global response will emerge. These ethics cannot be conceptualised as being ‘other-worldly’ but rather must be grounded in the world – a world that has been entrusted to us, a world that we must serve and love.

It is in this way that the defence of cultural diversity becomes an ethical imperative. It is because of this that moral ethics and values are central to humanity’s survival. Ethics provide direction – they are the lifeblood and yardstick of cultures and civilisations. A tested and tried manifesto of these ethics can be found in humanity’s repository of Scriptures, all of which exude certain humane values such as mercy, compassion, truthfulness, humility, selflessness and boundless love.

Allow me to share with you a few examples from the Sikh tradition, both historical and contemporary, that have sought to promote this idea of a ‘new planetary consciousness’. The new planetary consciousness demands us to move beyond the boundary of tolerance and acceptance, hitherto advocated and practised by governments, to a greater threshold of respect and ultimate sacrifice for others.

Such an exalted level of consciousness is not impossible, and was in fact practised four centuries ago by the fifth Sikh Guru - Guru Arjun Dev Ji, who was cruelly tortured on orders by the fanatical Mughal Emperor Jahangir for not acceding to his malicious demands and jealousy of the Guru's growing popularity. It is to be noted that this unique martyrdom, if it can be so-called, entailed laying down His life as He put it, in compliance with the sweet will of God – “tera keya mitha lagay naam padarath nanak mange” without presenting any conditions, yearnings, demands or harbouring any ill feeling or revenge for the torturers. Guru Arjan Dev Ji practically demonstrated how self-interest had no role to play in conflict resolution by not engaging even in passive resistance when he passed on. The boundary of consciousness had in fact remarkably and uniquely been exhibited beyond the commonly known phenomenon of non-violence and passive resistance to zero-resistance, without revenge or malice. For a prophet or person claiming to be of God, compassion, mercy and forgiveness have of necessity to be boundless and endless. This is the bedrock of any religion. The Guru illustrated that one cannot forsake it, even for a millisecond; in spite of the odds or the situation.

Similarly, some three hundred and thirty-one years ago, the ninth Sikh Guru – Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji, by laying down his life in Chandni-Chonwk in Delhi, defended the right of the Hindu faith (which was not even his own faith) to be practiced by the Brahmin pandits of Kashmir. Large numbers of Hindus were being forcibly converted to Islam at the point of the sword by the fanatical Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. This period of state-violence, in today's terms, would be considered an act of genocide. Once again, the Sikh

Guru exemplified the need for shifting the boundaries for sacrificing oneself for others and offered an ideal that the new suggested planetary consciousness could emulate.

Another three hundred year old example for this proposed new planetary consciousness is witnessed in the profound act of Bhai Kanhaiya Ji, a Sikh water carrier, entrusted with the responsibility of serving water to the thirsty and wounded Sikhs during battle. He tended to the injured and dying without distinction. Infuriated that he was also helping the enemy, his fellow Sikhs reported this to the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh Ji, who summoned Bhai Kanhaiya Ji. When questioned about his actions, Bhai Kanhaiya Ji humbly said that he saw only the Guru's face in everybody and in his heart he was serving water to the Lord. The Guru, deeply imbued with compassion, blessed Bhai Kanhaiya Ji for acting in the true Sikh spirit and gave him a container of ointment to heal wounds and to continue his humanitarian service. Bhai Kanhaiya Ji was a precursor to both the Red Cross and the Red Crescent, and encapsulated the Sikh teaching “no one is my enemy, and no one a stranger; my companionship is with all alike”. He embodied the Godly quality of *Nirvair* – having no hatred towards others.

In July 2004, after many months of preparation, the hard work of some 300 volunteers of the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha came to fruition during the fourth Parliament of the Worlds Religions in Barcelona, Spain. A Gurudwara or Sikh place of worship was set up in marquees on the Mediterranean seaside. Some 4000 to 7000 interfaith delegates came daily to partake in free langar from the Guru's kitchen. Above all, this was a

spiritual encounter that was showered with Blessings from the almighty and illustrated that interfaith cooperation was no longer a “talk fest” but rather a project of action.

Reflecting on such transformative acts makes us realise that it is possible, indeed imperative, for us to have respect and love for cultural diversity and that this is the absolute precursor to any conflict resolution. This entails the realisation of the commonality and universality of all humanity and is only possible through Love. When one begins to love all creation, it becomes impossible to differentiate the ‘us’ from the ‘them’. This entails a responsibility to the ‘other’. The message we each need to take to our communities is that Love, non-discrimination and respect for diversity are not merely vague utopian ideals but are a practical and workable means to conflict resolution and can be achieved through transforming the mind.

Thank you.

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September 8, 2006

New York.