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Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier opening the 10th World Assembly of Religions for Peace in Lindau, 20 August 2019

Surely the best-known utopian pop song of the 20th century, the song everyone starts singing when they are dreaming of a good, of a better, future, is John Lennon's "Imagine".

Not only was it recently declared "Song of the Century"; it was also performed by Colombian singer Shakira in 2015 before the 70th anniversary session of the United Nations General Assembly, in the presence of more than one hundred heads of state and government.

Ever since its release in 1971, this song has moved millions: thanks, no doubt, to its wonderful melody, but also its visionary text, culminating in these lines:

"Imagine all the people living life in peace
You may say I'm a dreamer / but I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one".

I think it's safe to say that all of us here today would like to echo this message of peace. In this song, however, it is indivisibly linked with statements that are decidedly critical of religion. Indeed, the song begins with the desire for a world without religion: "Imagine there's no heaven / Above us only sky / ... Nothing to kill or die for / and no religion too". An irreligious world is well-nigh posited as the fundamental precondition for a peaceful world.

This is quite a provocation for all those for whom religion is important, for all those who find meaning in faith, who have found and continue to find orientation and succour in their faith.

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It is also an intellectual, political and, not least, practical challenge to all those who hold a leadership position or function within their faith community, in other words for all those who are responsible for how their religion impacts on daily life, for how it presents itself and for its public image.

Those of us to whom religion and faith are important – and as a practising Christian I deliberately include myself here – cannot remain indifferent when many people keep saying that religion is nothing but a phenomenon which prevents peace and indeed promotes war.

We have to admit that regrettably, all too often in the past this was indeed the case – and it is still all too often the case today. A terrible war once raged even in such an idyllic place as Lindau: the Thirty Years War, a war prompted by religion, a war which was always also about creed and in which all of humanity literally went to hell. Only once all the religious debates had been put aside could the war be ended with the Peace of Westphalia, concluded through state diplomacy.

Religious faith can be a great, indeed a wonderful, power which can shape a person for his or her entire life, which can give strength and meaning in both life and death. However, faith and religion can also be abused – in order to justify inherently non-religious intentions and political goals.

Not only in mediaeval Europe was this true. Even today, in many parts of the world, we see how religious feeling and conviction and the human desire for sound orientation can flip over into violence against those with different beliefs or so called unbelievers. Be it in Myanmar, Nigeria, Mali, the Middle East, Indonesia or Pakistan – again and again we see how religion can appear as a dreadful, literally merciless power, particularly under the influence of cynical leaders with no conscience.

Religions for Peace proves, both in theory and in practice, that this can and indeed must be different. Religions for Peace is serious in its conviction that religions must no longer be used as the justification for discord and war, but on the contrary that they can – and must – be instruments of peace.

Otherwise they will fail to meet their goals and will lose all credibility. Religions' commitment to peace is, of course, important first and foremost in the cause of peace itself. It is, however, also crucial for religions per se. What is at stake is nothing less than their acceptance as credible ambassadors of a reality which inevitably affects people.

Peace is one of the most profound promises made by all religions: the peace of the soul which individuals seek for and within themselves, and the peace with fellow human beings near and far which makes possible a successful, satisfying life for all.

I believe that religions can, as effective and resilient advocates of peace, make an indispensable and irreplaceable contribution towards the service of humanity. Religions for Peace has helped us rediscover this. Not just with smartly formulated declarations of intent, which cost nothing, but in the practical, everyday context, in particular at regional and local levels.

It was precisely this belief in the religions' necessary and potentially beneficial peace mission that inspired Nathan Söderblom and his fellows who, after the atrocities of the First World War, waged among so called Christian nations, aimed to build unity among the Christian churches, primarily in the service of peace. One motto of the movement, formulated by Hermann Kapler, President of the German Evangelical Church Committee, was quoted frequently by Nathan Söderblom: "Doctrine divides, service unites".

Far beyond the Christian context, this motto appears to me to be of significance for cooperation among all religions which, as is the case with Religions for Peace, aim to preserve and establish peace.

Now, we all know that every religion initially regards it as an impertinence to be asked to line up with other religions – and to attach the same importance and the same value to other religions. Every religion claims to be the one true religion. It is, in a manner of speaking, in the essence of a religion to claim to know the truth about Heaven and Earth, about God and humanity. No religion that wants to be taken seriously and to retain its credibility can depart from this.

But this claim to truth can and must be defended using only peaceful means. We have presumably all learnt by now that any religion that tries to establish itself through oppression, violence or terror is bound merely to discredit itself.

In Religions for Peace, everyone is aware of their own and others' claim to the truth – but in the first instance this plays no role at all in your practical cooperation. Doctrine divides, service unites. The interreligious cooperation which Religions for Peace urges and enables proceeds on the assumption that the priority must be to create – through peace – the space in which the religions can interact. In other words, the assumption that peace is the prime task on which the religions can and must work together.

Here, peace means more than the absence of war. Peace means the possibility of sharing fairly in the world's resources. Peace means being able to practise and express one's religion and faith freely. Peace means having equal rights, irrespective of gender, origins or social status. Peace, in this broader sense covered by the Hebrew word "Shalom", means being able to lead a life in dignity.

Without peace, it will be impossible to truly attain the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The work of Religions for

Peace is therefore increasingly becoming political work to improve global living conditions for all. None of the goals which make it possible for all people in the world to live a life in dignity can be achieved without peace. And if there is no peace among the religions, there can be no peace at all. By dint of their own aspirations, the religions ought to feel called upon to work energetically to realise the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

During my time as Foreign Minister, I was able to see just how constructive cooperation can be between concrete, peacemaking policy on the one hand and concrete attempts at reconciliation via religion on the other – and in some instances how constructive it already is. Religions can be constructive forces in the resolution of conflicts. This is a crucial new field of foreign policy which needs to be explored and made use of.

In Germany we take the fact that religions are among the biggest social actors in the world very seriously. One reflection of this attitude is the establishment of a separate Religion and Foreign Policy Division at the Federal Foreign Office. Another is our particular support for the work of Religions for Peace. So I am extremely happy that you are holding this world assembly in Germany. I urge you all to continue your engagement.

We may be of different faiths. But we must be united in our shared belief that religion must never be cited as a justification for hatred or violence! No war must be waged in the name of religion.

That must be the joint message we send out here in Lindau!

When Pope John Paul II first invited representatives of all the religions to a world day of prayer, the gathering took place in Assisi, Umbria, the home of Saint Francis, a man wholeheartedly committed to peace and reconciliation and highly respected and honoured not only by Christians.

I should like to end with a prayer or song often attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi, though it is unlikely actually to have originated with him. It is, however, entirely in keeping with his principles, and I think all well-intentioned religious people can easily subscribe to it. Its very first, wide-ranging request is for peace, for which every individual can be an instrument:

“Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
Where there is hatred, let me bring love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is discord, harmony...”

In the spirit of this prayer, I wish all participants in this World Assembly here in Lindau, and all Religions for Peace activists around the world, every success.

Thank you and Shalom!