

THE FREEDOM OF RELIGIONS TO MAKE PEACE – The Vision and the Walk¹

Eminences,
Venerables,
Excellencies,
Brothers and Sisters, All

Alfred Lord Tennyson once said: “Tis not too late to seek a newer world”. And it is a newer world we need.

St. Thomas Aquinas once said: “Three things are necessary for the salvation of man: to know what he ought to believe; to know what he ought to desire; and to know what he ought to do”.

Given where we are very graciously hosted, and who our erstwhile partners in this Assembly are, it is appropriate to note that this was echoed by the German writer and statesman, **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe** who noted that *“Man is made by his belief. As he believes, so he is”*.

Given who we are, it is equally a propos to herein quote the Buddha, when he said: *“However many holy words you read, however many you speak, what good will they do you if you do not act on upon them?”*

This brings me to the space I have occupied and come from the last two decades, the United Nations orbit: one of the basic principles of the Charter of the United Nations is that of the dignity and equality inherent in all human beings. All Member States of the United Nations have pledged themselves to take joint and separate action in cooperation with the Organization to promote and encourage universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion. Indeed, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenants on Human Rights proclaim the principles of nondiscrimination and equality before the law, and the right to ***freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief***.

The Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief notes, among other things, that:

“The disregard and infringement of human rights and fundamental freedoms, in particular of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or whatever belief, have brought, directly or indirectly, wars and great suffering to mankind, especially where they serve as a means of foreign interference in the internal affairs of other

¹ By Dr. Azza Karam who is a Professor of Religion and Development at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, The Netherlands; a Senior Advisor on Culture at the United Nations Population Fund; and a Coordinator of the UN Interagency Task Force on Religion. All opinions expressed in this paper are hers alone and not indicative or representative of any Board, Council, Territory or entity.

States and amount to *kindling hatred between peoples and nations*" {emphasis added - <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/instree/d4deidrb.htm>}.

Eminences, Venerables, Excellencies, Brothers and Sisters All,

We are living these most egregious times, now where there is kindling of hatred between peoples and nations.

Religion or belief, for anyone who professes either, is one of the fundamental elements in our human conception of life. Should we not, therefore seek to fully respect freedom of religion or belief – and, as people of faith, seek to ensure that they can be guaranteed, such that freedom of religion and belief can contribute to the attainment of the goals of world peace, social justice and friendship among peoples, and to the elimination of ideologies or practices of colonialism and racial discrimination – which are arguably, powerfully, re-emerging today?

Indeed, we live in times of what many describe as some form of a democratic recession. And if these forms of democratic recession are to be reversed, a concerted effort by democracies and all forms of international institutions is very much needed to expand the shrinking space for dissent and pluralism.

Yet when it comes to promoting human rights, the foreign policy of most nation-states tends to single out religious freedom, rather than freedom of expression, as worthy of special emphasis.

Many western foreign policy-makers in particular are in the process of creating several bodies which are attempting to play – and indeed do play - a pivotal role in promoting freedom of religion on the global stage, by shining a light on the persecution of religious minorities and prisoners of conscience, aiding efforts to stop the internationalization of blasphemy bans, and selective naming and shaming of countries committing violations of religious freedom.

Yet – and this is an important qualification - many scholars as well as peace-makers and development practitioners, including a strengthened movement of resistance to cease the proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons - argue that there are limits to what can be accomplished by a narrow focus on religious freedom.

The right to worship according to the **dictates of one's conscience does not ensure political pluralism or press freedom. It limits free expression to the realm of religion, often excluding those who champion democracy, human rights, anti-corruption, and environmental concerns.** The truth is, however, that if these features (democracy, human rights, anti-corruption and environmental concerns) are not also actively struggled for, we can only realise the religious freedom of those in collusion with political power. This renders especially

vulnerable all those who are not and that is the majority. And in turn, we see a perpetuation of a vicious cycle.

In fact, it is clear that in both principle and practice, it is possible for authoritarian states to embrace religious freedom, while freedom of expression always constitutes an existential threat to dictators of all sorts.

This prompts an important inquiry which Religions for Peace is poised to ask – and to answer. As an institution which brings together all the world’s religious institutions, and upholds the values common to all faiths – that is, specifically love, compassion and mercy - ***what would happen if these very same religious leaders and institutions themselves, decide to jointly play a pivotal role in securing freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief?***

As a means of trying to answer this question, let us first seek to understand this “freedom” of which we speak and tie to ***freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief ...***

Freedom

Nelson Mandela notes in his work on *Long Walk to Freedom* that “*There is no easy walk to freedom anywhere, and many of us will have to pass through the valley of the shadow of death again and again before we reach the mountaintop of our desires*”.

The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. spoke thus: “*When we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: 'Free at last! Free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!'*”

Two African proverbs come to mind here:

If your mouth is in someone else's kitchen it cannot get its independence.
([African Proverb](#)) - and

It's better to eat a mushroom in freedom than to eat meat in slavery.
([African Proverb](#))

Rather than explore the entire gamut of what freedom entails, please allow me to settle for a quick look at how the notion of freedom is sometimes understood and practiced in terms of sustainable development – the undergirding of what we call today – the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)/Agenda 2030.

Why do I choose to do so? Because the SDGs were signed onto by 193 nation-states. For those of you who know the challenges of international human rights and international humanitarian law, and for those of you well familiar with the challenges of having any one government agree to a policy direction, there is little doubt you can appreciate what it means to have 193 governments agree to one set of global priorities for human development.

So let us review therefore, the notion of Freedom as understood from a secular human development paradigm – very much in operation today, and part of what Dr. Vendley refers to as “the Modern Order”.

Freedom as Development/Development as Freedom

In *Development as Freedom* (1999) Amartya Sen - an Indian economist who was awarded the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for his contributions to welfare economics and social choice theory, and for his interest in the problems of society's poorest members - quotes the eighteenth century poet William Cowper on freedom:

*Freedom has a thousand charms to show,
That slaves howe'er contented, never know.*

Sen explains how in a world of unprecedented increase in overall opulence, millions of people living in rich and poor countries are still unfree. Even if they are not technically slaves, they are denied elementary freedom and remain imprisoned in one way or another by economic poverty, social deprivation, political tyranny or cultural authoritarianism.

The main purpose of development, Sen argued, is to spread freedom and its 'thousand charms' to the “unfree”. The unfree, we know to be in today's figures, the millions who live not only in poverty alone, not only without access to affordable quality education, or decent levels of food, nutrition, sanitation, a safe and secure environment, or even those without access to decent employment opportunities. In fact, the unfree, are those whose lives are impacted *simultaneously by the intersecting calamities of all of the above, plus an environment which threatens each and every life on this planet.*

Freedom, as Sen persuasively argues, is at once the ultimate goal of social and economic arrangements and the most efficient means of realizing general welfare. Social institutions like markets, political parties, legislatures, the judiciary, and the media, contribute to development by enhancing individual freedom and are in turn sustained by social values. Sen actually links values, institutions, development, and freedom - as he sees them being closely interrelated.

Using Sen's understanding then, juxtaposed against today's environmental realities - and learning from many other developmental economists and scientists - *freedom is the holistic work of ensuring that we have a sustainable environment (land,*

sea/oceans/water and air) which comes together with, and indeed enables, the essentials of a dignified life: education, universal health care, decent employment, and the absence of violence.

As a side point: this is why when an organization such as Religions for Peace focuses on development, a siloed approach to programmes and projects, does result in some incremental successes. But to seek to achieve a tipping point for sustainability of any endeavor, the deal is to work holistically on the intersectionalities – i.e. where peacemaking work also simultaneously serves educational needs, poverty, and employment. But I digress, let us continue the journey of Freedom.

So what about the faith-inspired and faith-rooted communities? How is it that we may explore what freedom means to us?

I choose – and feel free to take me to task afterwards – but if you do I will remind you that the Secretary General of Religions for Peace, who stewarded, for 27 years, this entity of all religions, which is but one year shy of its half-a-century mark, did speak to those very same values as well.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I speak of ***mercy, love and compassion***. I choose to focus on freedom therefore, from the prism of those precise values which undergird all religions.

Freedom as MERCY

“A little bit of mercy makes the world less cold and more just”.

Pope Francis

“You are what you believe in. You become that which you believe you can become.”

Bhagavad Gita

Thus, if we believe in mercy, we shall become merciful.

As people of faith, allow me to ask some rhetorical questions:

can we live without experiencing mercy ourselves – from our Divine Creator, and certainly from one another?

And if we cannot live without some form of mercy, ought we not to understand that within each of our faith traditions, there is a call to be merciful towards others?

How can we be merciful towards others, if we deny them their right to freedom of religion or belief? Indeed, how can we claim to be people of faith, if we do not actively struggle for that freedom not only for ourselves, but mercifully, for those freedoms for each and every fellow human being?

As the Bhagavad Gita enlightens, there is mercy in showing mercy. Therefore, it is merciful to demand that as I claim the freedom to believe in the Divine in whatever

form I believe the Divine takes, I will *actively affirm* your freedom to believe and to exercise that belief.

Freedom as LOVE of the Divine, and therefore one and all

There is an African proverb which says: “Tell me who you love, I will tell you who you are”

Surat al-Maida (Sura 5, verse/Ayah 48) – reads thus:

Bismillahi al Rahman al Rahiim

وَأَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ
مِنَ الْكِتَابِ وَمُهَيْمِنًا عَلَيْهِ فَاحْكُم بَيْنَهُم بِمَا أَنْزَلَ
اللَّهُ وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَاءَهُمْ عَمَّا جَاءَكَ مِنَ الْحَقِّ ۗ
لِكُلِّ جَعَلْنَا مِنْكُمْ شِرْعَةً وَمِنْهَاجًا ۗ وَلَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ
لَجَعَلَكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَلَكِنْ لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ فِي مَا آتَاكُمْ
فَاسْتَبِقُوا الْخَيْرَاتِ ۗ إِلَى اللَّهِ مَرْجِعُكُمْ جَمِيعًا
فَيُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ فِيهِ تَخْتَلِفُونَ

To thee We sent the Scripture in truth confirming the scripture that came before it and guarding it in safety; so judge between them by what Allah hath revealed and follow not their vain desires diverging from the truth that hath come to thee. To each among you have We prescribed a Law and an Open Way. If Allah had so willed He would have made you a single people but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to Allah; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute [Surat al-Ma'ida/5: 48- Translation Yusuf Ali]

In acknowledgment of this, theologians tell us that Muslims are called upon to have an inner love and compassion for people of all faiths, races and nations, for they consider them as the manifestations of God in this world and treat them with an heartfelt respect and love. This is the very basis of communities administered by Islamic morality.

Moving away from scripture to the realm of literature, Chinua Achebe - a Nigerian novelist, poet, professor, and critic – says:

“We cannot trample upon the humanity of others without devaluing our own. The Igbo, always practical, put it concretely in their proverb *Onye ji onye n’ani ji onwe ya*: “He who will hold another down in the mud must stay in the mud to keep him down.” (*The Education of a British-Protected Child: Essays*).

We cannot stay in the mud. Indeed, as people of faith, we are called upon, in the words of St. Teresa of Avila, not only to love the Divine, but to “accustom ourselves” to “*continually ... make many acts of love, for they enkindle and melt the soul...*”

And lest we forget and fall into the trap of making such acts for those who think and believe only as we do, St. Thomas Aquinas - an Italian Dominican friar, Philosopher, Catholic priest, Doctor of the Church and jurist in the tradition of scholasticism, reminds us that: “[W]e must love them both, those whose opinions we share and those whose opinions we reject, for both have labored in the search for truth, and both have helped us in finding it”.

But how do we love the Divine? I find an answer in the Talmud – also echoed in all faith traditions. In the Talmud it says:

Whosoever does not persecute them that persecute him; whosoever takes an offence in silence; he who does good because of love; he who is cheerful under his sufferings -- these are the friends of God, and of them the Scripture says: "They shall shine forth like the sun at noontide."

So let me share a very humble reflection with you based on this beautiful chain of wisdom: the freedom to love the Divine – as reflected in each and every living thing (including human, as well as living and breathing of the earth, of/in the water and of/in the skies), is **not a choice we make. It is an obsession we must have**. But the love of the Divine is tempered by freedom – the freedom to see the reflection of the Divine in each and every human being and living thing– including those who may not believe in any Divine ...

Freedom as COMPASSION

Father Emeka Christian Ubiezu (a Nigerian from the Catholic Augustinian order) writes of “Christ’s Compassion”, in *Towards A Politics of Compassion: Socio-Political Dimensions of Christian Responses to Suffering*. He urges the Church to “liberate compassion from its exile” – an exile where compassion is a matter of charity - and to do so by undertaking “action that consists of both material relief and justice making”. Father Ubiezu describes the world we live in as encompassing “widespread and scandalous forms of social suffering imposed on humanity [and a] reckless destruction of ecology”. Christians are called upon, therefore, to “undertake social transformation, through actions that are rooted in the experience of compassion”. In

answer to the how, Fr. Ibiezu immediately quotes an African proverb “When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion... Meaning that when people collaborate they can perform wonders”.

From Nigeria to the Kopan Monastery in Nepal, Kyabje Lama Zopa Rinpoche speaking in the [33rd Kopan Course](#) in 2000, further instructs us thus:

“If our mind is devoid of compassion, if our heart is devoid of compassion, inner peace and contentment, then no matter what extensive things or external practices we perform, it is not real religion. It’s not spiritual. Our heart is empty of spiritual practice”. I repeat: without compassion, our heart is empty of spiritual practice.

The movement of Religions for Peace needs to enact and to exact hearts full of spiritual practice. And it is through the trinity of Mercy, Love and Compassion that we can realize freedom of religion, belief, thought and conscience. That is, if we are to free the unfree, or to act upon the holy words all religions espouse.

Eminences, Venerables, Excellencies, Brothers and Sisters, All

Allow me to round up this section on Freedom, by sharing with full transparency, what, *further, specifically*, motivates *me* in this long journey to Freedom?

I find an answer in the Talmud, wherein we are told that “For the sake of peace one may lie, but peace itself should never be a lie.”

As an Egyptian, Muslim immigrant daughter of Religions for Peace – for I came to the United States as an immigrant in 2000, to work in Religions for Peace - I firmly believe that Religions for Peace’s peace should never be a lie. Nor should the efforts to seek it ever be wasted in lies.

My outlook may be encapsulated by the American poet, singer, memoirist, and civil rights activist Maya Angelou, who passed away just this year. Allow me to quote her verbatim: “[M]y mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor, and some style”. And allow me also to add my truth in my words: in addition to the compassion, humour and style, I believe, very strongly, and constantly strive for servant leadership.

Servant leadership demands humility. But meek, mild or weak and unclear, I am not. And will not be. For my faith, my peace, and my obsession with the Divine, is informed by loving to serve the Divine - including that residing in each of you - which I found in the words of St. Teresa of Avila:

“You pay God a compliment by asking great things of Him”

So, I beg of you, one and all, let us join together, as a movement of Religions for Peace, to pay God a compliment: Let us ask great things of God – the freedoms of all

religions to make peace - and let us make that ask with a humility based on an obsession with love, mercy and compassion of and with and about, the Divine, in all its forms and manifestations.

How do we Ask Great Things of God? The Walk to Freedom

So how do we begin to ask God for the ability to realize those Freedoms as Religions for Peace – we need to walk the talk. Here are some steps:

1. First, we ***build on the strengths we have already in Religions for Peace; namely unparalleled country level presence in the form of Inter Religious Councils (IRCs)***. These exist at least in 70 countries and 4 regions and convene all the country's religious leaders/institutions in a manner intended to reflect the nation's religious demography. Each of these Councils need to be strengthened qua ***structure, communication, shared narratives of engagement and purpose***. Therefore we envision ***a series of convenings cum capacity building exchange trainings, per areas of intervention***. The IRCs have to be the vehicle through which the Religions for Peace *movement* needs to be consolidated, enable partnerships in line with SDG 17, and strengthen national, regional and global joint civil society and multilateral efforts.
2. Further, we must ***ensure that the good work and investment of human and financial capital and resources to date, is harvested***, and can continue to flourish, thereby informing the broader RfP mobilisation. I refer specifically – albeit not only - to RfP's work in the areas of climate change and broader environmental concerns – with the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative as a critical example; the work on women's empowerment and gender justice (SGBV acting as one example); and the work on peace-making and peace-building over many years (including *inter alia* the Marrakesh Declaration, safeguarding holy sites, and collaborations around Prevention of Genocide and Hate Speech).
3. We also have to ***build bridges between RfP's IRCs and the broad faith-based development and humanitarian NGOs*** – both at country, regional and global levels. Religious institutions (and their leadership) have a unique set of strengths, but they are not the only institutions engaged in human development/flourishing or peacemaking efforts. The IRCs should never be expected to work alone in the broader religious and spiritual realms. Instead, there is a need to partner with those organisations who are working to deliver critical development and humanitarian needs. Serving people's spiritual needs and political interlocutors are critical, but not sufficient. Religious NGOs (FBOs) play important roles – sometimes quite literally saving lives. Building bridges systematically around common concerns between the IRCs and FBOs, therefore, is necessary.
4. As indicated above, the ***RfP movement needs to be seen and heard as champions of freedom of religion, belief and consciousness (FoRBC)***– the

overarching umbrella under which all the initiatives/themes/need to work. Some work on bringing all IRCs up to speed with the legal and multi-religious narratives on the one hand, and the specific challenges on the other, around FoRBC, will need to be invested in as part of building IRC members capacities.

5. Last but by no means least, we ensure we are constantly linking up the existing dots. We have no need to reinvent the wheel. Interreligious *diapraxis* (here meant as working across faith lines, together, to serve communities) has existed for at least a century – if not more. Similarly in longstanding existence are networks of FBOs (the UN has one of over 500 around the globe), multilateral entities (UN, EU, AU, SADEC, etc.) as well as secular NGOs and academia. ***RfP should systematically be in the business of working to link up these parts in and with its IRCs*** as a means of mutual capacity building and strengthening of shared advocacy around issues.

The Precise Modality – Task Forces

We envision **5 Task Forces** (see attached organogrammes) focusing on Freedom of Religion, Belief and Consciousness, Environment/Climate Change, Gender justice, Education and peace-making/peace-building.

Each Task Force/Commission will be composed of IRC representatives, in addition to one or more multilateral/intergovernmental counterpart (e.g. UN/EU), as well as FBOs, together with relevant academia and/or secular NGOs working on similar areas.

The Task Forces shall have clearly and jointly drawn out Terms of Reference, indicating purpose, deliverables in specified time periods, engagement modality (e.g. how often they meet and how), and jointly agreed means of evaluation.

The Task Forces shall be overseen by RfP International focal points for facilitation of regular convenings only, but each will have its own joint co-leadership, and select IRCs themselves (which serve as the main secretariat thereof) will be the main hosting, organizing and implementing entity/entities.

RfP celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2020. Thus, a Strategic Plan worked out along the above lines with the World Council (the IRC Board) as led by its Executive Committee, and for which the IRCs are solicited for input beforehand, means that RfP has a window of opportunity for outreach, as well as broad multi-sectoral engagement, all geared towards delivering on structure, and content with a view to realizing the SDGs/Agenda 2030.

May Peace Prevail on Earth and may all be blessed with it.

Thank you.

Azza Karam