

NAIROBI DECLARATION OF THE FOURTH WORLD ASSEMBLY

1984

In Nairobi in 1984, we of the World Conference of Religions for Peace have met in our Fourth World Assembly. We have come, nearly 600 of us, from 60 countries and from most of the world's religious traditions-Buddhist, Christian, Confucian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Shinto, Zikh, Zoroastrian, the traditional cultures of Africa and North America, and others. From our diversity of cultures and traditions, we have come to address a theme of urgent common concern: Religions for Human Dignity and World Peace. We address these goals of human dignity and world peace together, for they are inextricably linked and must be pursued together.

Our previous Assemblies in Kyoto in 1970, Louvain in 1974, and Princeton in 1979 have been milestones in the growth and work of Religions for Peace as we strive for peace, united by a spirit of cooperation. In Nairobi, in 1984, we find ourselves at a major turning point.

In the five years since we last met, the world has seen little progress in either the cherishing of human dignity or the movement toward world peace. While the nuclear arms race has continued to escalate in its staggering expenditures, in its rhetoric, and its incalculable danger, the massive human needs of poverty, hunger, unemployment, and lack of education have been grossly neglected. Militarization of societies, trade in arms, recourse to violence, religious and ideological intolerance, and assaults on human rights continue. The structures of economic and political oppression which perpetuate the privilege of a few at the expense of the masses are still firmly in place.

We are encouraged, however, by the widening awareness and public consciousness of the dangers and costs of our present world situation, and by the worldwide growth of grass-roots movements expressing the determination of people everywhere for change. It is time for new strategies and priorities for peacemaking, and for renewed commitment to our work.

We have met in Nairobi as men and women rooted in our religious traditions, and linked to one another in vision and action. We acknowledge the painful fact that religion too often has been misused in areas of strife and conflict to intensify division and polarization. Religious people have too often failed to take the lead in speaking to the most important ethical and moral issues of our day and, more importantly, in taking steps toward change. In meeting together, we have not turned from self-criticism or from very difficult discussions of sensitive issues. And yet our affirmation is one of hope.

The Nairobi Assembly has changed us. The new participation of over 100 youth delegates has given us the vitality and vision of a new generation, eager to join hands in concrete inter-religious projects for peace. The strong and energetic contribution of over 150 women has made clear the necessity of women's equal partnership not only in family life, but in the leadership of religious communities and social and political institutions. Over half of us here are participants from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, who have called Religions for Peace to a deeper understanding of our global inter-relatedness to working for peace.

“Disarmament means liberation, not only from arsenals of weapons ready for use, but from the perpetual fear and insecurity which have accompanied our obsession with the instruments of death. Development means liberation from hunger and poverty; it means a just sharing of the natural and economic resources of the world, and the investment of our energies in life, and in the future. As men and women of religion, we cannot tolerate the priorities of a world in which there are at least three tons of explosives, but not enough food, for every man, woman, and child on earth. We pledge ourselves...to reverse these priorities.”

Through our struggle, we have been able to build trust. We have shared in worship and meditation. We have discovered once again that our differences of culture and religion, far from being a threat to one another, are a treasure. Our multiplicity is a source of strength. We bear a testimony of experience that world community is possible. From our diversity of traditions, we are united in faith and hope, and in our common pursuit of human dignity and world peace.

I. The Context of Africa

Africa has not only been the place of this Assembly; Africa and the concerns of its peoples have shaped the very context and perspective of our discussions. The African traditional cultures have a strong spirit of community and family, and a vibrant sense of the wholeness of life. Many religious traditions now live together in the continent of Africa—the traditional religions, along with Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism and Judaism. The many religious communities of Nairobi have welcomed us and given us a sense of the riches and challenges of living together in the pluralistic society of Kenya.

The peoples of Africa have also experienced sharply the very issues we have addressed in our Assembly, and have helped us all to see these issues more clearly. The affront to human dignity of the apartheid regime in South Africa calls us to repudiate separation and division and to seek the community of all races. The cry of human needs in drought and famine, the growing militarism of African governments, the increasing arms trade in Africa, the instances of political intolerance, the penetration of East-West rivalry into African political affairs—all call us to a wide understanding of the dynamics of global insecurity and the effect of global, political, and economic structures on the emerging African states.

The new Religions for Peace/Africa is beginning to articulate the common values religious people bring to the creation of a just society. It stresses the need for active engagement in struggles for change and is committed to the realization of a new Africa.

II. Reconciliation in Regional Conflict

We are convinced that a major new priority of Religions for Peace must be to address ourselves to areas of chronic regional tension and conflict—in Southern Africa, the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, Central America, and Europe. Since World War II, over 150 wars, most of them in the Third World, have claimed at least ten million lives. Regional conflicts become swiftly polarized by East and West, and raise the level of instability and insecurity in the entire world.

The roots of these conflicts vary and are complex. But wherever such conflict takes on the language and symbolism of our religious traditions, pitting one against the other, it must be the business of Religions for Peace to be involved, both regionally and with Religions for Peace/International support.

We commit ourselves, as religious men and women, to undertaking the work of reconciliation and peacemaking. We must deal with the issues of religious discord where they arise. We must deal with the economic and political struggles which take on religious rhetoric for narrow or chauvinistic purposes. We must take action, as a multi-religious body committed to peace, in the very areas where religion and peace seem to be in opposition.

III. Disarmament

Disarmament has long been a priority for the work of Religions for Peace, and the urgent necessity of working for disarmament today is undiminished. With one voice, from our various traditions of faith, we insist that nuclear weapons and all weapons of mass and indiscriminate destruction are immoral and criminal, and that the stockpiling of such weapons with intent or threat to use them erodes the very foundation of moral civilization.

We join the scientists, physicians, educators, and statesmen who have taken an active role in opposing the arms race. We pledge our determined commitment to disarmament as we continue to work as a Non-Government Organization at the United Nations, and as we work to influence our religious communities and our nations.

Specifically, we call for an immediate freeze on all further nuclear weapons research, production, and deployment; the strengthening of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty; a Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty; and a No First Use commitment on the part of nuclear nations as essential initial steps toward the dismantling of all nuclear arsenals.

Conventional weapons are also instruments of death and oppression. Halting the spread of militarization and the commercial exploitation of developing countries by trade in arms leading to military and political dependency is a crucial part of our commitment to disarmament.

It is a sign of hope for the future that the youth of this Assembly have called for the establishment of ministries and departments of peace to work for the global security that ministries and departments of defense have been unable to realize.

IV. Development

Delegates from Asia, Africa, and Latin America have given us all a new perspective on the arms race, as seen through the eyes of the poor. For the poor, survival is not primarily a question of the future in a nuclear world, but an urgent question of the present in a world beset with hunger, drought, and disease. Our common commitment to peace is based upon the clear inter-relatedness between disarmament and development.

Disarmament means liberation, not only from arsenals of weapons ready for use, but from the perpetual fear and insecurity which have accompanied our obsession with the instruments of death. Development means liberation from hunger and poverty; it means a just sharing of the natural and economic resources of the world, and the investment of our energies in life, and in the future.

As men and women of religion, we cannot tolerate the priorities of a world in which there are at least three tons of explosives, but not enough food, for every man, woman, and child on earth. We pledge ourselves, through our religious communities and our governments, and through continued Religions for Peace cooperation with the U.N., radically to reverse these priorities.

We have a vision of a world in which the economic and political structures which perpetuate injustice and poverty are completely changed, and in which the armaments necessary to maintain these structures of injustice and oppression may be turned to plough-shares for the work of peace.

V. Human Rights

Along with disarmament and development, human rights are an essential part of the total and holistic peace we seek. We mean not only civil and political rights, but the right to live with all the basic economic, social, and cultural rights of life of fullness and freedom, including religious freedom. We reaffirm our commitment to the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and we insist that these rights are the very basis and foundation of a just and humane society and can never be postponed or suspended in the name of national security.

Our support for human rights must be consistent. Wherever human rights are trampled upon, we must speak out and act. We must resist and unmask selective and tactical use of human rights issues by nations, especially the US and the USSR, which raise their voices in one instance and ignore violations in another, as it suits their political ends.

Our South African delegates-Hindu, Muslim, and Christian-have all made us sharply aware of the suffering and incalculable violence done to individuals, families, and whole peoples by the racist ideology and “theology” of apartheid. We commit ourselves to work toward changing the international political and economic structures which support the South African regime.

In our concern for human rights, we must also work regionally and internationally on many other affronts to human dignity. Despite efforts being made by political leaders and religious people, there is deep-seated prejudice resulting in many forms of discrimination against scheduled castes and economically oppressed and socially stigmatized classes in South Asia, against the Burakumin of Japan, and against the indigenous peoples of the Americas, Australia, the Philippines, and elsewhere.

The world has many millions of refugees, with no right to the roots of home, four million of them in Africa alone. And there are countless human beings stripped of their human rights behind closed doors. They have disappeared; they have been imprisoned without trial; they have been victims of torture. Wherever, and in whatever way, human rights violations occur, it is our concern, internationally and inter-religiously.

We support with conviction and hope the 1981 UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, and we pledge to support its implementation.

VI. Peace Education

Education for peace is more urgent than ever before. As religious men and women, we pledge ourselves to stressing and raising to public consciousness the foundations of peacemaking within our own religious traditions, through education in temples, churches, mosques, synagogues, and homes. This will require our commitment to planning, training, and funding for peace education programs. As religious people of action, we must deliberately link our personal lives and daily choices to our wider work as peacemakers.

In our religious institutions, and in schools, colleges and universities, we will encourage new initiatives for peace education. Our public and community life must include knowledge and discussion of the realities of the arms race, the conflicts that lead to war, the means and strategies for non-violent resolution of conflict, and the work of the UN and UNESCO.

Essential to peace education is learning about and coming to understand those of different religions, ideologies, and cultures with whom we share our communities, our nations, and our world. In many cases, the opposite of conflict and violence is knowledge, and so educational efforts must be made that fear may begin to give way to trust. We must strengthen and deepen mutual understanding by sustained dialogue, and by undertaking common work together. We need to understand one another. We need one another in order to see and understand ourselves more clearly.

And we need one another in order to undertake together work that will require the resources and energies of people throughout the world.

The spiritual resources of our religious traditions give us strength to dedicate ourselves to the task ahead. We are compelled to turn the faith and hope that sustain us into dynamic action for human dignity and world peace.

Religions for Peace 