

THE RIVA DEL
GARDE

DECLARATION

OF THE

SIXTH
WORLD
ASSEMBLY

1994

Religions for Peace 

Nearly 1,000 participants representing many of the world's religions have gathered in Rome and Riva del Garde, Italy, for the Sixth Assembly of the World Conference of Religions for Peace, with the theme "Healing the World: Religions for Peace." A women's meeting and a youth meeting have formed an integral part of our conference. We who have gathered are of different religions and different countries, we celebrate different traditions and are shaped by different cultures, yet we have all come with a common commitment to seek peace, to pursue justice, and to protect our environment and our future as embodied in our children. We are also committed to the development of a vision of common healing.

In this time of transition, as the world passes from the Cold War to a new order yet uncertain, we race to keep up with events and technology. As ideologies collapse and relationships become more ambiguous, signs of brokenness abound. The encounter of richly diverse peoples, languages, religions, cultures and economic systems is providing impetus for a new world community. Yet poverty, injustice, lack of access to resources, oppression, discrimination and violence continue to burden the lives of billions of people. Amidst this, healing is evident where, after long struggle, injustice is being transformed to justice, oppression to freedom, discrimination to equity and violence to peace.

Many peoples enjoy greater economic, social and political freedoms. But gross inequities still exist and even multiply. Development and technological advances hold out many promises, but too often further separate the rich from the poor and degrade the environment. Never before has there been such an urgent need for an ethics to govern scientific advances, to harness their potential for the greatest good.

Steps have been taken toward nuclear disarmament and more systematic regulation of the arms trade, but arms proliferation remains unacceptably high. The extent of the militarization of our societies gives evidence of skewed values and priorities. The race of research and development continues to produce ever more deadly weapons.

Steps toward healing in such places as the Middle East, Central America and Northern Ireland bring hope of peace. We celebrate the binding of wounds in South Africa. We are joyful that Namibia is newly independent, that the peoples of Cambodia and Haiti have begun to rebuild their countries. We remember those who have sacrificed their lives to bring justice in these situations and others who continue to struggle.

A vision of a world community with rights and responsibilities is taking shape. The human rights of the most vulnerable and marginalized members of our society—women, children and minorities—are increasingly recognized. Yet discrimination persists in our world, indeed even in our religious communities. The sacredness of the earth and our unity with it are deeply felt in many places, and remind us of our responsibility to act as stewards of this fragile ecosystem which nurtures and sustains us. Yet the natural environment is being devastated at unprecedented rates.

Great dangers and deep pain remain in the uncertainty of this age. Our global society suffers a spiritual crisis so deep that positive changes are prevented. As the search for identity accentuates the long-repressed differences among peoples, disintegration and exaggerated individualism threaten the international order. Many states are experiencing decreasing social cohesion, leading to increased violence and weakened abilities to achieve moral consensus across group lines. Conflict is fueled by nationalistic, ethnic and religious violence.

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Our time has seen the breakup of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, the collapse of social order in such places as Rwanda, Somalia, and Haiti. The world has witnessed the terrible destruction of the Gulf War, the persecution of the Kurdish community, and the atrocities of ethnic cleansing in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. This war must be ended, and refugees and displaced persons must be allowed and aided to rebuild their lives.

Despite some advances, the people of the world suffer terribly. Civilian casualties in war have increased dramatically. There are 18.5 million refugees and 20 million displaced people in the world today. Women, children and the elderly are especially vulnerable in these times. Famine and disease have accompanied violence in such places as Sudan, Somalia and Afghanistan. HIV and AIDS reach epidemic proportions throughout the world.

As religious peoples, we are particularly saddened that religion is misused at times to legitimize violence and wars and stir hatreds. We strongly condemn destructive religious nationalism and religious extremism as crimes against religion. In response, we call not for uncompromising secularism but for authentic religion, which we believe must be a powerful force for human rights, freedom and non-violent political transformation; the impulse of religion must be toward peace, not war. We also call for increased dialogue between religious and non-religious approaches for healing the world.

On the threshold of the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations, we honor its accomplishments and note the challenges it faces. Since 1990, it has drawn and will draw together world leaders to discuss children, the environment, human rights, population and development, social development and women. The U.N. has and will draw attention, through yearlong emphases on indigenous people, the family and tolerance.

The work of healing and building peace and security in a fractured world presents new challenges to the U.N. and other international bodies, which are stretched beyond their capacities. We support the work of these organizations and affirm the renewed commitment of Religions for Peace to the U.N. as it advances a more comprehensive understanding of global security through sustainable human development.

Human security, which acknowledges the universalism of life, is embedded in the notion of solidarity among people. It acknowledges our interdependence and our broad-ranging needs for security: economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security and political security. Meeting the challenge of human security is essential to establishing peace.

A Call For Common Healing

We, from each of our religious traditions, envision a harmonious and peaceful universe as the goal of life and spiritual effort of humans. We begin our quest for community and harmony with the experience of a world that is broken and hurt. Each religion analyzes, in its own way, the causes of suffering and disharmony, and proposes concrete means to overcome them and build community. Religious communities have a particular concern for the victims of human systems, the poor and the oppressed, reaching out to them and advocating justice and fellowship.

As religions agree upon the experience of disharmony, they also agree that the causes are human and ethical in nature, and that people can overcome them through individual and social action, in the horizon of an Ultimate. Such action must focus on the various levels in which healing is needed to move from disharmony to community and peace.

Collaboration in Healing

While, in the past, each religious group may have looked at this need for healing and harmony in the context of its own community, today people of all religions live together. In such a pluralist context, religions too are sometimes causes for division. This is one more element that needs healing. However, there is a growing conviction that people of all religions must collaborate together in the healing of divisions and in the building of community locally and globally.

The Process of Healing

The movement toward community from division and brokenness involves a process of healing. Religious groups find inspiration and motivation for this ethical and social project in their own traditions. They must avoid the danger of becoming instruments of economic, social or political agendas, thus losing their spiritual-prophetic dynamism. In conversation with other religious groups, they seek to evolve common perspectives and concerns at the ethical and social levels. Such a convergence is emerging in the contemporary discourse concerning human, social and economic rights and duties, though the process is not always without pain, tension and struggle. A next crucial step is to translate this ethic convergence into plans of common action, inspired and supported by religion, in the social, political and economic fields.

The Power of Healing

The power of healing in its various dimensions—personal, social, global—must come from religious and other ethical and spiritual resources, in which people transcend their immediate concerns and needs and look from themselves to others, seeing life and the world in the context of an Ultimate. While promoting and profiting from positive resources of their own religion, religious groups should not only guard against abusing it for narrow political ends, but also highlight and develop its universal perspectives that make it tolerant and actively receptive to the religious experience and perspectives of other groups. Religions themselves need to be healed of any narrow fanaticism and exclusivism, precisely in the broader context of the Whole that transcends the limited experience of the group. Such healing releases the prophetic and spiritual dynamism of each religion for the transformation of society.

Personal Healing

The inner personal healing of every person in a social context is facilitated by his or her own religion. Through its experience and ongoing rituals, particularly those that respond to crises in the lives of individuals and of the group, religion provides ultimate significance to the

whole of life.

Healing Society

Religious peoples can engage in conversation and common action for the promotion of shared ethical values for the building of community. Such common action focuses on healing the various ills of society, with reference to the relationships of people to the cosmos and to each other.

Healing Communication among Religions

Such common action may lead to and be enriched by dialogue and sharing at the religious level. Dialogue can help us learn from history, remove prejudices and promote mutual understanding. In the context of healing, this might involve a confession of sin and shortcoming, on the one hand, and an act of forgiveness, on the other, leading to reconciliation. Sharing of sacred texts, respectful observance of other religious traditions and participation in common meditation can facilitate mutual enrichment and inspiration and even challenge. In this process, religions, without detriment to their identity and truth claims at the properly religious level, may discover themselves as being convergent and complementary at the socio-ethical level.

A Specific Option

One way of showing the authenticity of one's commitment to promote shared ethical values in society is to champion peace with justice for all, including the poor, the marginalized, the defenseless, women, children and the oppressed. In this manner, attention and effort are devoted to special areas where the healing touch of religions is particularly required. Religions speak of this special attention to the victims of society in terms of compassion, justice, equity and love. Today such an option may include conflict, although we believe resolution of conflict must be non-violent and oriented to peace and harmony.

Isolation and Fragmentation: Searching for a Common Ethic

Dynamic forces in our fast-changing contemporary societies have created a new willingness to seek guidance and inspiration from religions on issues facing humanity.

Humankind is one great family. We have basic spiritual values arising from our common human experience and our shared planetary home. However, as individuals and as groups we have lost touch with the harmonizing spiritual values by which our religious traditions have encouraged us to live. We have become isolated fragments, often indifferent to what happens to our neighbors and to other groups.

We therefore encourage all members of our human family—whether materially rich or poor, young or old, with or without academic education, to join in the process of uncovering and sharing the treasures of their communities. Our hope is that each community may be re-inspired by its own values, that we may be enriched by the sharing of others' traditional values, and that we may seek convergences in our basic ethical principles.

While our ethical criteria are inextricably rooted in our varying spiritual traditions and diverse cultural contexts, we are nonetheless interdependent, not only with other humans but also with other forms of life. This interdependence is expressed in common values such as helpfulness toward others, reverence for life and compassion.

Such common values commit us to put them to work in ourselves, propose them before local, national and international institutions, and introduce them to our young generations.

Violence and War: Building Peace and Security

Violence and war are further evidences of deep-seated social, political, economic and religious ills. Currently more than 40 wars, most of which are civil, are wreaking their destructive powers on virtually every continent. The causes of such conflict are many, found in selfishness and in psychological drives for power and control; economic and political exploitation and domination often manifest in patterns of neo-colonialism and market manipulation; ethnic and nationalistic chauvinism playing on the hatreds and prejudices of the past and manifesting themselves in civil war; ethnic cleansing leading to genocide; and religious fanaticisms stimulated by social and psychic insecurities.

Such conflicts are complicated by two factors. First, the level of violence has been heightened by the increased destructiveness of the arms that are readily available on world markets, with ever more diabolical weapons emerging from the arms research and development laboratories. Second, the instruments of international peacemaking and peacekeeping are insufficiently developed to facilitate the resolution of conflict.

Yet we know that war and violence are preventable. Their prevention requires effort in the spiritual as well as practical realm, both economic and political. In the spiritual realm we need to practice the concepts and processes of reconciliation, which require a willingness to repent, to ask and grant mercy and forgiveness, to acknowledge that the purpose of historical remembrance is not to lay the seeds of future conflict, but to insure the evil of the past is never repeated.

In the political realm the task is to end the arms race, the manufacture and trade in deadly weapons of destruction, and to build the regional, international and inter-religious instruments of conflict prevention, peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding. In the economic realm the requirement is to redress the economic and social ills that lead to conflict.

In all relations—political, economic, spiritual, social—the building of trust and confidence is essential. Only with

such commitments can the world achieve the goal set out 50 years ago in the creation of the United Nations: to end the scourge of war.

Injustice and Poverty: Struggling for Equitable and Sustainable Development

The crying need for a healing touch is evident in the socio-economic condition of the human family, a condition that is characterized by widening inequality between and within nations, reflected in the great disparities of lifestyles and the absolute poverty of a billion people worldwide. Crushing debt and the imposed economic structural adjustment programs burden developing countries, which have inadequate means to eliminate them. The ongoing militarization of many societies with repressive systems reflects the continuing impact of the arms race. Systemic inequities in the distribution of opportunities and resources persist between men and women in all countries. The planet's natural resources are plundered, and ecological devastation is left in the wake of environmental pollution. The exponential growth of the world's population has undermined the capacities of weak political systems to satisfy even the barest of human needs. The absence of sufficient meaningful employment and the continued marginalization of many peoples mark societies worldwide.

These accumulated ills have generated familial and societal discord and degeneration, fostered political mistrust between religious communities, engendered endemic conflict and violence between ethnic groups, and contributed to tension between nation-states.

These inequalities are a systemic characteristic of our global community. They mark the condition of an anarchical world society, devoid of effective collective procedures and dominated by an international system that is competitive rather than cooperative. There is a lack of commitment to the common good, embodied in a system that too often uses its resources and power to perpetuate rather than heal inequality. These inequalities also reflect the inadequacy of national sovereignty, which must yield to interdependence. Such an interdependence will not only be technical, environmental and economic,

but also ethical. One way in which this can be shown is through fair and just trade.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern European Marxism has dashed the hopes which millions of idealistic people held that Marxist economic theories would build a just society where unemployment and poverty would be eliminated. At the same time, the individualistic ethic of capitalism has similarly failed to provide justice and the elimination of poverty, even in the wealthiest and most developed nations. The world's religious communities must seek a third way, which respects the communal and interdependent dimensions of humanity; a way based on mutual love and respect for individual rights, but which incorporates an acceptance of communal responsibility for our brothers and sisters.

Aware that the ultimate values of religion are impossible without the eradication of poverty and injustice, we, religious peoples, must work to fulfill the ethical obligation to foster human community which engenders the fullness of spiritual life.

Oppression and Discrimination: Affirming Rights and Responsibilities

Oppression and discrimination are symptoms of the world's brokenness and its need for healing. Victims of human rights abuses remind us that oppression and discrimination take many forms. Murder; massacre; torture; communal and domestic violence, especially against women and children; genocidal war; attack and intimidation; imprisonment; displacement; apartheid; the destruction and vandalism of houses of worship and the private property of religious minorities; oppression of marginalized groups; and the denial of religious freedom, of citizenship rights, of access to jobs and education, and of entry into other countries are powerful examples.

These actions are intolerable denials of that dignity inherent in the very being of the human. We affirm that every human being has both rights and responsibilities.

The right to religious freedom is basic to and inseparable from other human rights. In relations of religion and the state, when an interfaith ethos of pluralism is upheld by the state, the well-being of minorities, as well as that of the whole nation, are fostered.

Religions and religious leaders frequently fail to defend human rights. For religious people, there can be no such thing as neutrality in the face of injustice. Defense against injustice must be carried out in non-violent and non-repressive ways. People of religious commitment must search for and find constructive ways to build a new world of peace and justice.

Wasted Life: Caring For The Child

Our traditions inform us that societies will be judged ultimately by the condition of their most innocent, most dependent and most vulnerable members-their children. We are to be held accountable for the impact of violence, including that which occurs in our own homes and in war upon children-maimed bodies, destroyed homes, broken families, spiritual traumas. We are to be held accountable for the ravages of poverty on children-the malnutrition, the toll of preventable diseases, the stunted growth, the lack of education and opportunity, and extinction of hope. We are to be held accountable for the victimization of children-through child labor, sexual exploitation, forced military service. We are to be held accountable for the destruction of their inheritance as the environment is permanently damaged and non-renewable resources are consumed.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child provides us with a framework to guide our efforts on behalf of children, including a “First Call,” which embodies the concept of a priority to save, protect and care for children.

Children’s rights belong in the mainstream of human rights. Yet they are broader than individual rights. Children have a right, and we have an obligation, to ensure that the environment in which children live is one that supports and nurtures their development.

Educating children about the beliefs and values of their own religious tradition and those of others is of paramount importance in seeking a peaceful world. Families are the first educators of children, and must be supported, sustained and strengthened by religious communities.

“The sacredness of life, honored in our religious traditions, founds our belief in the ultimate meaning and value of the child. The sacredness of life compels us to be a voice of conscience...The grim realities we confront demand our outrage because they exist; they demand our repentance because they have been silently tolerated or even justified; they demand our response because all can be addressed.” [from the Declaration of the World’s Religions for the World’s Children, World Conference of Religions for Peace, 1990]

Our goal is the harmony of humankind. In order to realize this objective, we must work collaboratively using every available resource. The children of today and tomorrow will be the torch bearers of a harmonious world.

Endangered Earth: Restoring Ecological Harmony

Nature groans and all life on earth calls for help to survive. The environment urgently needs healing. The earth’s ecological components and its people are interdependent. Each species of life is dependent upon other species. The survival of all is predicated on the maintenance of a subtle balance and harmony. We are called not only to recognize the oneness of all life on earth, but also to protect it. If one element of life is endangered, all will suffer.

Many religious people only belatedly came to realize this ecological interdependency of earth, in spite of relevant teachings in their religious traditions. Often we have been too engrossed in the achievements of modern science and technology, economic development and material consumption, and have forgotten the oneness of life and nature. We have dominated nature as if we were entitled to do so. This arrogance is a root cause of the present ecological crisis. In our work to restore harmo-

ny and common living, we must begin with repentance for our destructive actions and must effect a paradigm shift from an anthropocentric to a life-and eco-centered model.

Religious communities, working jointly, have much to contribute to the development of a common environmental ethic calling for new ways of thinking and new lifestyles. This ethic will require attitudinal and structural changes so that equitable and sustainable development may be achieved without causing damage to the environment. Further, it will call for just and benevolent relationships between humans and nature, between the more developed and developing worlds, and between present and future generations. Religious communities should make it a priority to educate their members, especially their children and youth, in the common environmental ethic.

The voices of women in the development and institution of this ethic must be central, for many of the world's women work and live close to the earth, often tending its fields and gathering its fuel and water for the survival of their families. Moreover, an attitude of caring, nurturing and healing should be encouraged in society in its relation to the environment.

Religious communities are called to stand with the poorest and weakest members of society. Now we must extend this concept of solidarity to the environment. If the air is contaminated, if a species is on the verge of extinction, if the soil is eroded, if the forest is lost, if the water is polluted, all people will suffer with them. We, especially, as religious people, must be their voice and their protection in the world, so that all people are urged to work for the healing of ecological infirmities. The elements of nature have a right to claim healing; we have a responsibility to help realize that healing.

Restoring ecological harmony means peacemaking with nature. Accordingly, our concern about environment is an integral part of our striving for peace.

Healing the World: Religions for Peace

As this Assembly draws to its close, we call upon all members of Religions for Peace to be fully committed to the proposals and creative action plans presented by each Commission. Therefore, we take upon ourselves the solemn responsibility of translating the spiritual vision shared by all of us in healing the ills of the world in collaboration with all people of good will. We are critically aware of the serious situations facing humanity. We will vigorously seek to nurture, tap and harness the human spirit to ease suffering and to create families, communities, nations and a world based on reverence for every individual human being. Toward this end, may each of us humbly seek courage, patience, wisdom and compassion.

Religions for Peace 