

# Religion and Peace

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Date: 26 March, 2006

Event: International Association of Religious Freedom Conference

Dear Venerables, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to welcome all of you to Fo Guang Shan for the 32<sup>nd</sup> General Conference of the International Association of Religious Freedom. In particular, I would like to welcome the organizers Andrew Clark, the IARF International Secretariat at Oxford, Akiko Sekine, Vice President, of the International Association of Liberal Religious Women (IALRW), Masamichi Kamiya, deputy director of the organization's External Affairs Department, Kiyoko Kizuka, member of the organization's External Affairs Department, Megumi Hirota, Secretary, Rissho Kosei-kai of the UK International Association for Religious Freedom, Rev. Yoshinobu Miyake, Executive Director of the Konko Church of Izu, Takeshi Nishida, the deputy head priest of Tamamitsu Jinja, President of Itto-en, Kazuhiro Motoyama, Yuji Inokuma, International Director of Tsubaki Grand Shrine and many others. They have paid several visits to Fo Guang Shan from the year before and conducted five preparatory meetings for this conference. It is their hard work that has made today's event possible.

The theme of this year's conference is "Religion and Peace." Its objective in achieving world peace through religious exchanges **therefore happens to conform with** contemporary thinking, and also points out the fact that religion has **the responsibility** in promoting world peace. As the whole world now yearns for peace, how do religions come together and make it happen? I humbly present the following four suggestions regarding this matter for your reference.

**1) Relinquish exclusiveness; respect one another for greater tolerance.**

Religion has been an essential part of human race for as long as it has existed. The importance of religion lies within its ability to provide a guide to life's general direction as well as a vital link between one's past, present and future lifetimes. This is why each one of us needs to have a religious faith, because only faith will guide us in finding a set of norms and objectives in life.

Religious faith and moral ethics allows the society to progress in an orderly manner, which is much needed in times of continued natural disasters and manmade calamities. For example, as soon as the September 11 terrorist attack happened in 2001, President Bush immediately called for a religious gathering, hoping that through the help of religion, his people can find peace of mind and be given the courage and wisdom to face such a difficult time. I even paid a personal visit to Ground Zero shortly after along with a Catholic priest to chant for the victims and pray for world peace because people were greatly affected by terror and fear during that time.

This is proof that religious faith is beyond national borders, and that it can help settle people's minds and enhance world peace. Therefore, every religion in this world has the duty of promoting respect between nations and harmony between races, allowing different languages to communicate with each other, different cultures to make exchanges, and for men and women to be treated equally. With respect to world peace in particular, religions must set a good example by respecting and accepting each other, and demonstrate a broad mind and great capacity of tolerance for different religions and other communities in society. Not only is this the duty of religions, it is also their contribution to today's society.

The first step toward this goal is oneness and coexistence, **and remove the exclusiveness of certain religions**. Although each religion has its own founder, followers of other religions should still respect each other without getting confused with one another. Each religion's doctrine also has its own objective and should be allowed to develop accordingly, while followers should feel free to communicate and socialize with each other.

What I mean by this is that the founder of each religion cannot be mixed up, Jesus is Jesus, and Buddha is Buddha, nor can the doctrines be confused with one another, because literature is literature, science is science, and medicine is medicine, they cannot become each other. However, there is no reason that the followers cannot be friends. For example, even if you are a Muslim or Christian, and I a Buddhist or Taoist, we can still respect and befriend one another.

Respect is an essential factor to inter-personal harmony. While we all wish to be respected by others, most of us tend to neglect the similar wish of others. It is said, "One who respects others shall be respected by all; one who loves others shall be loved by all." Only by respecting and accepting each other will we be able to work with collective wisdom and concerted efforts to achieve our common goal. When the five fingers respect each other and clasps together, a fist is formed. With a fist, there is power, and only with power will we be able to pursue peace. Therefore, religions must embrace each other's uniqueness and appreciate each other's similarities. This is similar to our different facial organs mutually accepting and respecting the place and function of each in order to coexist in harmony.

Buddhism is a religion that always advocates respect and tolerance, and the least exclusive amongst others. For example, the Buddha established his order and advocated that whoever becomes a monastic shall be regarded as the people of Sakya Clan. Be it a prince from the

ksatriya's caste or a slave from the sudra's caste, the Buddha regarded all his disciples as equals. Even Maha-kasyapa, the fire-worshipping Brahman, or Katyayana the **one preoccupied with metaphysics one**, were **touched** by the Buddha and later regarded as the backbone of the Sangha. **The Buddha's great capacity of acceptance for those different from him allowed his ten most outstanding disciples to each have their own uniqueness, and the one thousand, two hundred and fifty disciples to all attain enlightenment. The Buddhist belief and practice of chanting and laying prostrations in front of the Buddha are all based on the concept of respect. If we doubt or look lowly upon each other instead of being respectful, there cannot be peace. Peace without respect cannot persist, therefore if religions wish to achieve eternal peace, they must begin by respecting each other. When religions respect each other and unite as one, world peace shall no longer be a difficult goal to achieve.**

## **2) Cease infighting; unite for stronger influence.**

When we take a look at the history of religions, we will see that each of them consists of numerous sects or schools. Some follow a certain leader, while others follow a certain doctrine. When too many sects exist, similar to having too many political parties, problems will arise **and create disunity**. Take the Protestants as an example, a cardinal once told me that Protestantism consists of over five thousand sects, and even God is known in different names such as Jehovah, Lord, God **and so on**. **With this** large number of sects **as well as divided** opinions and leadership, how can they ever unite and come together?

Buddhism also consists of different traditions such as the Mahayana and Theravada Traditions; Northern, Southern and Tibetan Schools; Esoteric and Sutric Schools; or even the Schools of Emptiness and Existence. However, what makes Buddhism different is that although it also has different schools and the followers are from different

backgrounds, they all believe in the same Buddha. They also share the same fundamental principles such as the Three Dharma Seals and Four Noble Truths. Therefore, under the guidance of the one Buddha and a common set of teachings, **the Sangha, whose members are from different places and adopt different lifestyles all honor the same Triple Gem.**

In fact, the most serious issue faced by religions is not the undermining of strength due to too many sects or schools. It is the lack of tolerance for different thinking, opinion, and styles which make it difficult for people to unite. The insistence on “obey my words or prepare to face destruction” may cause internal disputes in a religion. If even those of the same religious organization fail to harmonize, how can they influence others? Therefore, despite the fact that all religions endeavor to guide people towards a higher state of being and virtue, when different schools of a religion do not harmonize with each other and cause constant internal disputes, **what right do they have to** speak of peace?

Therefore, in order to unite the power of religions for enhancing world peace and bring the function of religion into full play, we need to begin with harmony and respect between followers of different religions. By making personal examples in the pursuit for world peace, we will be making the most persuasive propagation of religion. In particular, as we live in the era of the global village, people have come closer and are involved in more active interactions, we should strive to maintain positive and friendly relationships. As such, we shall all enjoy an auspicious coexistence living in joy and harmony.

### **3) Cease insistence on one’s view; selflessness is the only path to harmony.**

During the 2000 Inauguration Ceremony of Fo Guang Shan Nan Tien Vihara in Australia, I was asked by one of the distinguished guests, Frank Arkell, a member of Parliament, “Who is the best religious leader

in this world?” My answer was, “Your favorite one is the best.”

There is no absolute best or worst in this world. Most people consider the object of their belief as God or Buddha, and see those whom they do not believe in as devil or demon. Furthermore, a sense of exclusiveness is inherent in religious followers, and they tend to choose not to be friends with those who are different from them. Take the Crusades for example, it was a religious war between Muslim and Christianity for control over Jerusalem, a place commonly agreed as the sacred land. A total of eight wars broke out during the period between 1095 and 1270, and in 1921, the Muslims finally conquered the last city occupied by the crusaders and put an end to the famous Crusades.

The Crusades are a typical example of religious war, but why do wars arise between religions? The most likely reason is political ambition, when your goals and beliefs differ from that of others, especially when there is a conflict of interest, political disputes occur. This is caused by egoism.

‘I’ is the cause of disputes, because of ‘I,’ people become selfish, attached, love-clinging, and disputative. A single egoistic thought is sufficient enough to cause endless turmoil. The chapter on similes and parables of the Lotus Sutra says, “One who has heavy attachment to the self is like a hungry ghost.” This tells us that the only way to world peace is through letting go of the self, just as the Diamond Sutra tells us, “No attachment to the form of self, no attachment to the form of a person, no attachment to the form of sentient beings, no attachment to the form of life.” Only selflessness brings common justice, and only common justice brings peace.

Although some people have already eradicated their attachment to the self, they are still clinging onto the Dharma. Just like the arhats in Buddhism, although they are no longer attached to the self, their persistence in pursuing the truth is still there. Due to this persistence,

they tend to lack tolerance, and are therefore involved in continued disputes or even forced to initiate a war.

The most important meaning of religion is to seek liberation. However, how can liberation be possible if attachment exists? This is why religions must be tolerant, and amongst them, Buddhism is regarded as one with the greatest capacity for tolerance, because be it the Medicine Buddha, the Amitabha Buddha or the Meitrya Buddha, they all follow the same path, and even Guangong the red faced legend and Mazu, the goddess of the South China Sea, have a place in Buddhism.

Buddhism embraces those who are different, and therefore has never been involved in any war or conflict throughout its two-thousand five-hundred years of history. To Buddhism, Confucianism is regarded as the vehicle of humans, Christianity and Islam the vehicle of heavenly beings, and Daoism the vehicle of sravakas and pratyekabuddhas. Each of them respects and accepts each other. They are in harmony and do not hinder each other's existence in any way.

Religions function with the universe and coexist with humanity. Amongst the many religions in this world, Christianity, Catholicism, Islam, and Buddhism each has its own founder. However, be it the Lord, God, Allah, Buddha, or even the various gods or deities, they are all a figure of belief chosen by the follower. Although different in name, their significance is the same. Since we have each chosen our own belief, whether it is Jesus, Muhammad, Confucius, God or Guangong, all that matters is we recognize the object of our belief. Furthermore, we must not reject each other, try to prove that our belief is the best or demand others based on our belief. There should be harmony between religions and also peaceful coexistence so as not to lose religion's nature of truthfulness, virtue, and beauty.

#### **4) Cease opposition between one another; only compassion finds**

**peace.**

People often ask whether world peace is ever possible. Despite the fact that every era has been filled with disasters, just as long as people maintain a kind heart, their inner peace shall bring peace to the world.

Religions are known to be the advocates of peace, and are therefore most respected. However, sometimes peace also requires the assistance of power. For example, in the past, when the Roman Catholic Church proposed world peace, Russia's Stalin asked, "How much armed forces does your Pope have in Europe?" What he meant was, the promotion of peace needs to be supported by power, and without power, one may find it difficult to speak of peace.

Buddhism is the greatest supporter of peace, it also advocates spiritual cultivation to subdue evil. However, the evil that needs to be subdued is not ones who battle against us but the afflictions from within. Spiritual cultivation is about taming one's mind, therefore, the power of compassion and endurance are thus required to adorn our hearts. If religions wish to achieve world peace today, power is still a necessary factor, and this power comes from the laws of causes, conditions, and effects. In other words, it is the power of dependant origination, the power of loving kindness, compassion, joy, and generosity, and also the power of unity and harmony.

Compassion calls for the will to put oneself in another's shoes. The most serious issue in today's world is terrorism, in other words, violence has placed a constant threat to the whole world, causing perpetual fear. However, force cannot put an end to force, only compassion can do so. For this reason, during the war between USA and Afghanistan, America also brought food and supplies to relieve the Afghan people, and even helped to build schools for them. Therefore many Afghans were also grateful to America. Take the America-Iraq war as another example: America's purpose was to bring down Saddam



Hussein, but they also have to take care of the Iraqis. From this we can see that compassion will win friendship.

Compassion is the basis of Buddhism. Just as the Dhammapada tells us, “All sentient beings fear death, all are afraid of the knife and cane. Seeing the similarity to oneself, one should not kill or strike with a cane.” By standing in each other’s position, we will treat others as we do ourselves, and the practice of compassion will not be difficult. People shall be able to get along peacefully, and humans and nature can coexist as well.

Technological advancements have brought people closer. The invention of telephone, television, computers and the Internet have enabled those from different parts of the world to be close like neighbors. However, secular wisdom has its merits and demerits. While technology has given the human race wealth and enjoyment, it has also lengthened the gap between people and caused problems such as traffic accidents and computer crimes. Therefore, it can be said that technology itself does not bring ultimate happiness to the human race.

One thing more important than scientific inventions is the exchange and communication of thoughts and ideas between human beings. When humans interact, socialize, understand, and help each other, world peace will be possible. Therefore, world peace is not about shutting ourselves up but coexisting as one. There needs to be respect and interaction between people, nations, and religions in order for all to coexist and prosper.

In conclusion, I propose the following four points as my response to the theme “Religion and Peace,”

- 1) Relinquish the exclusiveness; respect one another for greater tolerance.
- 2) Cease infighting; unite for stronger influence.
- 3) Cease insistence on one’s view; selflessness is the only path to

harmony.

- 4) Cease opposition between one another; only compassion finds peace.

May all religious leaders strive to call for awareness in the world working for world peace. Last but not least, may you find ease in mind and body, and be blessed with auspicious coexistence.