

Faiths Together for a Better World

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Introduction

Thanks to Marcus Braybrooke for inviting me to share the platform on an important and topical theme, "Faiths Together for a Better World." My wife and I have read your books and have high regard for your exemplary interfaith work and also your valuable contribution to World Congress of Faiths for building peace, harmony and justice in our world.

Interfaith meetings like today and around the world increase understanding and cooperation with other faiths for social justice and the common good of the humanity. On a positive note, religions of the world have been sources of major social, economic, political changes and advancement. The concept of nonviolence, enhanced capacity for empathy, tolerance, forgiveness and compassion has its roots in religions of the world such as respect of other faiths. Religion is an instrument which refines one's mind, for inner development for building a peaceful society. Throughout ages faiths have been the very bases of our understanding. The very origins of nonviolence is brought to us by religion, not to hurt no creature even the humblest as we are all interconnected.

Gandhi believed in the fundamental truth of all great religions of the world. He said that we should read the scriptures of different faiths from the standpoint of the followers of these faiths as we should find that they were at the bottom one and all helpful to one another.

The saint Rama Krishna often described different religious experiences as different melodies of music. The Rig Veda, considered to be the oldest book on earth have described the reality of the world as:

Truth is one: paths are many
Reality is one: sages call it by various names

I will, in my talk today, explore how faiths can promote peace, nonviolence and work in cooperation for a better world.

Violence, Terrorism and Religion

One of the most pressing contemporary issue threatening peace in Europe, Middle East and elsewhere is violent religious extremism leading to rampant terrorism. While religious zeal can be a healthy and constructive component of life, when religious passion promotes violence towards those with different values and beliefs, it becomes a threat to the wider society and religion can be seen as a cause of conflict rather than a solution. In these troubled times, how can we keep our values and keep major faith communities to work together while isolating extremism. There are many excuses for violence, such as race,

national origin, gender or sexual orientation, but perhaps the saddest one of all is the violence in the name of religion.

Religion or faith is an instrument of inner transformation of human beings so that they can behave ethically in a nonviolent way towards all living beings. If we kill those who do not subscribe to one's view, it negates its very meaning. A religion that enslaves, tortures and kills is no religion at all. It is a travesty, a monstrosity in the guise of a spiritual path. In our times, we have observed this phenomenon in the way in which a violent few have perverted and deformed the beautiful and venerable religion of Islam, but we have seen it happening before with other faith traditions.

Our goal of peace fuels an ardent desire for dialogue about the issues around this violent conflict. A nonnegotiable condition for this dialogue, however, is that violence needs to stop.

Those who subscribe to violence as a method to achieve their goals need to stop or be stopped. The innocent need to be protected and safeguarded, the displaced need to return safely to their homes, and then in a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation, we can find a way to move forward to our goal of peace.

Peace requires action. Immediately. Today we look back with horror to contemplate tragedies like the Armenian genocide or the Jewish holocaust and wonder "How could this happen?" "Why didn't anyone do anything to prevent it?" All tragedies emerge from seeds of hatred, and prejudice leading to violence and killing.

Core Beliefs of Hinduism – Love, Compassion, Unity, Nonviolence and Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (The World is One Family)

Traditionally, Hinduism has adopted an ancient Sanskrit phrase Vasudhaiva kutumbakam, which translates as "The world is one family." The essence of this concept is the observation that only base minds see dichotomies and divisions. The more we seek wisdom, the more we become inclusive and free our internal spirit from worldly illusions or Maya. World peace is hence only achieved through internal means – by liberating ourselves from artificial boundaries that separate us all. As with all Dharmic religions (Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism), ahimsa (avoidance of violence) is a central concept.

One of the root causes of violence is lack of inner peace. There are five obstacles to inner peace which are aptly described in the Indian scriptures in various ways in Vedic culture, Bhagavad Gita, Jainism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism. They are Kam (lust), Krodh (rage, anger, fear and hatred), Lobh (greed of wealth, power and fame) – excesses of capitalism and corporate power, Moh (attachment, delusion, ignorance or obsession) and Ahankar (Vanity, pride or ego) destroyer of the tranquillity of the mind. These are five

basic causes of violence leading to suffering of human existence. The self-control of all these five evils is the key to inner peace and also the core contribution of all major religions of the world. Inner peace comes from within and it is futile to seek it elsewhere. It radiates from within and our behaviour will be its own manifestation. What you do towards people is a reflection of who you are and what you feel inside.

India is the only world culture to have been ruled by four leading religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. In that respect, its history is unparalleled. What other people can claim the likes of Gautam Buddha, Mahavir, Vivekaanand, Sri Ram Krishna, Shankracharya and Mahatma Gandhi.

Emperor Ashok (304BC - 232BC) who, when Romans were busy killing each other, he created an exceptional doctrine of life in which subjects of all faiths in his kingdom were protected under his code. He was one of the first Emperor to put the doctrine of nonviolence into practice to the extent that even deer hunting was banned by him in his kingdom. The teachings of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, promoted that there is no Hindu or Muslim, “All beings and creatures are His (God’s). He (God) belongs to all” – Guru Granth Sahib 425

Hindus believe that life is a series of beginnings, not endings. Creating is an ongoing process and when we aim to create a perfect world, where love and compassion are shared by all for suffering to cease.

Faiths Working Together for a Better World

It will be an understatement to say how much exemplary work faith organisations around the world do to build peace and harmony. Their valuable contribution to the society is drowned by media who concentrate on depicting wars, terrorism, religious intolerance, and hatred, anything to grab a headline. However, in the midst of many conflicts, interfaith movements continue dialogue and cooperation between different religious and spiritual traditions promoting on similarities between faiths to understand values and reality, and uphold commitment to peace and common good. Our last Inter-Faith well attended event was in a Mosque in Edinburgh in April on Religion and Middle East Conflict: Inter-Faith Reflections

An overview of some of the interfaith organisations is below:

World Congress of Faiths (WCF, UK), The Parliament of World Religions (PWR, Chicago), International Associations for Religious Freedom (IARF, Boston), The Temple of Understanding (TOU, New York), The World Conference for Religions for Peace (WCRP, Kyoto) and United Religious Initiative (URI, San Francisco) and our own Uniting for Peace (Edinburgh and London) and many more faith organisations are sharing wisdom,

understanding of different religions for co-existence, peace, religious pluralism and tolerance.

Another way of working together is to celebrate and participate in festivals of different faiths which can enhance understanding of other religions an uplifting experience for all.

Conclusion and Way Forward

In yoga, according to its founder Patanjali, some of the first precept of Ahimsa (nonviolence) is do not kill, do not hurt or harm anyone, do not think ill of others.

In other words, The Hindu ethos permits co-existence , mutual respect and harmonious living of different groups as this world view is based on emphasising the origin of all existence in one truth, God or Brahman.

We all want to see a world free of pain, cruelty, free from violence and barbarity that perpetuates suffering on earth and revalidate the power of love, compassion and forgiveness.

With this in view, myself and Uniting for Peace started a campaign about Europe for Peace. The core message of the campaign is that European Union has brought peace to the European continent for the last 70 years and made wars unthinkable on the European soil. If we replicate the institutions and infrastructure of European model of peace to other continents, we can end conflicts around the world.

I have said in the campaign and my new book “Peace Beyond Borders: How the EU brought peace to Europe and how exporting it would end conflicts around the world and that another world is possible.”

We cannot afford to repeat the same story yet again. We cannot have our own children and grandchildren look back to wonder about our own inaction or worse, about our support to the rhetoric of fear and hatred that is becoming alarmingly frequent in our religious and political arenas. In this respect, there is a huge responsibility on political and spiritual leaders of all faiths to join together in the enormous task of working for peace and harmony. It can be a great learning curve for multiculturalism, a recipe for peace, prosperity and a safer future for all of us.

In life, there is no room for pessimism and also there are no easy solutions. Bringing changes and building a better and peaceful world requires hard work and takes perseverance and patience. But the end results are there like the abolition of slavery, civil rights, women’s rights, ending of apartheid, reunification of Germany are a testament to the progress of humankind.

On reflection, one must take into consideration that progress has its own strange ways of manifesting itself. In the 17th and 18th century in the age of reason, we had spread of science and industrialisation in the midst of rampant slavery, which carried on business as usual. Lord Wilberforce had 40 years of struggle to finally pass the bill in the parliament for the abolition of slavery bill. That also needed manipulating as he had to do it by the back room. He did it by giving MP's tickets to go and watch racing in Derby so that they will abstain from the parliament on the day of voting.

In conclusion, let me say that, civilisation in the long run can only prevail if a society is based on moral and ethical values and standards. What we need is more faith, more inner peace to rectify the dire situation of the universe. I think that is the essence of all faiths. We as spiritual followers of all faiths have the widest, largest and deepest reach. We can make a huge difference for us and future generations. Let's do it, our work starts right here, right now. Let me finish with the simple words of Rev. Daniel Berrigan, one of the important religious figures who died recently. When asked how to live in a culture of death and madness, said "Find some people you can pray with and march with"

Thanks for listening.

Notes:

1. Hall, Tarquin, Makers of India – Fifty people who shaped the subcontinent, The Times, 2016
2. Mehta, Vijay, From Inner Peace to Global Peace, Budapest, April 2016
3. Braybrooke, Marcus, What we can Learn from Hinduism, O Books, UK 2002
4. Mehta, Vijay, Is Nonviolent Future Possible?, International Peace Conference, Jaipur, India, 2014
5. Rodriguez, Guillermo, Interfaith: Do We Still have a dream? 22 May 2016, Ventura County Star

Words of Wisdom

“If there is to be peace in the world,
There must be peace in the nations.
If there is to be peace in the nations,
There must be peace in the cities.
If there is to be peace in the cities,
There must be peace between neighbours.
If there is to be peace between neighbours,
There must be peace in the home.
If there is to be peace in the home,
There must be peace in the heart.”

Chinese Philosopher, Lao Tse, 6th Century BCE

“May there be peace to the heavens, peace to the skies, peace to the atmosphere. May there be peace on the earth and peace in the waters. May there be peace to the forests and peace to the mountains. May there be peace to the plants, animals and to all creatures. May we all live in peace”

From the Vedas, considered to be the oldest book on the Earth

One of my most treasured verses in the Qur’an has a universal message: “If God had so willed, He could have made you a single people, but His plan is to test you in what He has given you, so strive as one human race in all virtues according to what He has given you (5:48).” Most especially in the wake of trauma and terror, how we each decide to engage with “the other” is our own individual choice, but the fate is shared by us all.

The Qu’ran

“It is law of love that rules mankind had violence and hate rules us we would have become extinct long ago. The tragedy is that so called civilised persons and nations conduct themselves as if the bases of society was violence.”

Gandhi

“When a person responds to the joys and sorrows of others, as if they were his own, he has attained the highest state of spiritual union”

Bhagavad Gita - 6:32 - Sri Krishna

Bio – **Vijay Mehta** is a distinguished author and leading peace activist and a champion for Development and Human Rights. He is the chair of Uniting for Peace (www.unitingforpeace.org) and Founding Trustee of Fortune Forum Charity (www.fortuneforum.org). He is a Director of Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND)

Working since 1979, Uniting for Peace is a non-profit organisation devoted to creating and promoting a global culture of peace, nonviolence and poverty reduction. The flagship campaign of Uniting for Peace is called 4D for World Peace. It is a campaign to create global frameworks for taking actions on interconnecting global issues of disarming and demilitarising the world and the savings thus achieved to be deployed for development and democracy. In 2016, Uniting for Peace have initiated a new campaign “Europe for Peace – Count Me In” (www.europeforpeace.org.uk) – It is an educational campaign aims to contribute positively to the upcoming UK referendum on EU’s membership highlighting the EU’s peace endeavours.

The charity Fortune Forum whose founder is Renu Mehta, daughter of Vijay Mehta, held summits (2005 and 2006) where Former US President Clinton, Former US Vice President Al Gore and Actor Michael Douglas were keynote speakers. The summits raised over a million pounds for charity and attracted a worldwide audience of 1.3 billion people (one fifth of humanity) including print and media coverage.

Vijay Mehta’s books include The Economics of Killing (2012), The Fortune Forum Code: For a Sustainable Future (2006), Arms No More (2005) and The United Nations and its Future in the 21st Century (2005).

Vijay Mehta's new book **Peace Beyond Borders: How the EU brought peace to Europe and how exporting it would end conflicts around the world** will be published in June 2016 in print and ebook by New Internationalist. The book contributes positively to the upcoming UK referendum on EU membership by highlighting the EU’s peace endeavours, with a foreword written by Jose Ramos-Horta, Nobel Peace Laureate and former president of Timor-Leste.

In 2014, Vijay Mehta’s bio, “The Audacity of Dreams” appeared in the book Karma Kurry, published by Jaico Publishing House (India). It included 25 other inspiring change-makers’ biographies. Nelson Mandela who wrote the foreword to the book, had this to say, “Ordinary people do extra ordinary things. These stories have that power to inspire people to rise and act, to make a difference.” To read Vijay Mehta’s full bio, please follow this link: <http://goo.gl/JcUGwr>

He has appeared in various TV programmes including BBC World, Press TV, Aitak-24 hour Indian news channel, and Think Peace documentary, Canada, among others. The Sunday Times, Independent, Observer and Guardian newspapers, among other journals have written about him. His life is devoted to the service of peace, humanity and our planet.

Vijay Mehta is the recipient of the Global Indian Karmaveer (Action hero) Puraskaar (Award) by iCONGO (International Confederation of NGO’s). He is now a noble-laureate 2012 – 2013 of the iCONGO team of advisors and mentors (www.icongo.in). It is an award for outstanding luminaries working for peace and social justice. He has been awarded as Global Peace Ambassador by Global Diversity Peace Centre London in 2015

“Vijay....a long standing activist for peace, development, human rights and environment”
The Sunday Times Magazine, London 1st February, 2009

“Vijay Mehta lends intellectual credibility to the project and wrote ‘The Fortune Forum Code for a Sustainable Future’, a sort of manifesto that will underpin the group’s future activities.”
The Independent, London 26 September 2006

“Thank you for all you do Vijay - both the Organisation and yourself are inspiration and give us all hope that both yourself and Uniting for Peace can bring a world without war. Indeed it is possible, even in our own time.”
Mairead Corrigan Maguire, Nobel Peace Laureate (1976)

Vijay Mehta is among the 1,300 Notable Peacemakers Throughout History
http://peace.maripo.com/p_peacemakers.htm

He is among the 98 Peace Philanthropists around the world.
http://peace.maripo.com/p_philanthropy_bios.htm