

## **Role of Religions in Promoting Intercultural Understanding for Sustainable Peace in the Asia Pacific Region**

Revd John Henderson  
General Secretary, National Council of Churches in Australia

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*Your Excellency, Professor Din Syamsudin*  
*Monsignor Machado*  
*Father Ismartono*  
*Fr Phang*  
*Your Excellency, Ambassador Suprpto Martosetomo [of Indonesia]*  
*(Your Excellency Archbishop Filoni)*  
*Your Excellencies, Ambassadors to the Holy See*  
*Mrs Giles of Australia and other Diplomatic representatives, other honourable guests and friends...*

The purpose of our Seminar today, as I understand it, is to bring before you our efforts in the Asia Pacific region to build constructive interreligious Dialogue on a regional level. This is a large task, as it requires a multi-lateral approach painted on a very large canvas. Our region is broad and complex, and the breadth of our religious experience is as wide, if not wider, than anywhere else in the world. In Asia there is a saying that all the world's great religions have their origins in Asia – which is a fine line, I suppose, depending on which side of it you place the Middle East.

It is difficult, here in Europe and in the 'North', to describe the reality that is Asia and the Pacific. People look at an Australian and they think, 'Here is another European' – until he opens his mouth and describes his reality. It is true that we are a recently arrived, migrant society, and that we are still building a national identity in our region. The whole of the world has poured its migrants into our country, and who we are is a result of this amalgam. They haven't just come from Europe – they come from other parts of Asia, South America, Africa, and the Pacific. We are also still learning to appreciate the contribution of our Indigenous peoples. It is worth your attention to observe the lessons we are learning as we build this mix into an effective, free, and democratic country, one that carries the hopes and dreams of its people into the future. The fact that ¼ of the population also identify themselves as

Catholic, in the context of this seminar, makes your attention even more important.

Let me begin then, with words that recently came from here, in the form of a greeting sent by Cardinal Tauran to the world's Muslims for 'Id at the end of Ramadan. This greeting was heard, not only in Europe and the Middle East, but as far away as Australia. In it, the Cardinal emphasises the importance of infusing young people of both religions with a spirit of justice and inclusion. This is urgent, he writes, because *"It is the common good of every society and of the entire world which is at stake."*

This statement places a great deal of responsibility on the world's religious leaders. Now is time for people of faith, and their leaders, to take responsibility. The world is too small and interconnected for us to settle our differences by separation or violence. Not only that, our faith speaks against it. While there are some who blame religion for the conflicts of the world, it is up to us to prove that faith is a force for good, and that authentic religious practice is a basis for healthy living and sound relationships.

Cardinal Tauran strengthens his view by offering dialogue as a means of breaking the cycle of violence and injustice. Again, he writes, *"Dialogue is the tool which can help us to escape from the endless spiral of conflict and multiple tensions which mark our societies..."* I note also that in his address to his Excellency the Ambassador on Tuesday, His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI expressed the same thought when he said: *"Dialogue, respect for the convictions of others, and collaboration in the service of peace are the surest means of securing social concord. These are among the noblest goals which can bring together men and women of good will, and, in a particular way, all those who worship the one God who is the Creator and beneficent Lord of the whole human family."*

Where, when, and how, is this dialogue to take place? Dialogue is a discipline of listening as much as it is of speaking. It is about respectful engagement,

knowing the other, careful choice of language, reframing the debate, and above all being willing to be changed by our encounter. It is a relationship with ups and downs, occasional false starts and challenged assumptions. Above all it is characterised by personal acceptance, patience, grace, and, eventually, understanding.

Therefore true dialogue cannot be dictated or manipulated, but must remain open, ready for scrutiny, with regular progress checks. The actions and words that emerge out of dialogue cannot be predetermined. If global religions, then, are to be in dialogue, it must be a profound engagement that emerges from deeply held convictions.

I can understand that, seen from the so-called global 'North', what we do in the 'South' does not always appear with the same urgency, say, as do events in the Middle East or elsewhere closer to home. If that's because we are settling our differences peaceably and building regional co-operation and harmony in constructive ways, then we shouldn't complain. It is worth noting, however, the strong relationship between Australia, which is a Westernised nation in a decidedly non-Western geographical position, and our close neighbour Indonesia, which is the world's 4<sup>th</sup> largest nation and 80% Muslim. Both are democracies but with very different histories. One is an archipelago of islands populated by hundreds of millions of people; the other is a dry and dusty continent with an immigrant population of just over 20 million. Given our proximity, it is a situation with potential for conflict, but instead it is marked by co-operation, understanding, and a growing, positive relationship.

From a religious perspective, how does this work? How do the religions of these two countries learn, not only to tolerate, but to co-operate and appreciate one another? The days are gone when our answers can come from Europe, the Middle East, or elsewhere. They can only come from ourselves, and maybe the answers we find will resonate in other places and other situations. We have chosen not to succumb to the threats of terror and violence that have been issued elsewhere and that affect us both. We are

determined to build steady relationships, on a dialogue of trust and understanding. Despite our differences we will join together in what is good, and what works, as a mark of our faithfulness to God and our mutual responsibility for the welfare of our respective populations. Interreligious dialogue on a regional basis is important for the safety and protection of all people. Perhaps even, as Cardinal Tauran wrote, *"of every society and of the entire world"*.

Against this background, what is happening in the Asia Pacific region is remarkable, nowhere more so than in the efforts of various national governments, particularly Indonesia, Australia, the Philippines, and New Zealand, to facilitate interreligious dialogue on a regional level. From the original initiative of the foreign ministers of Indonesia and Australia, this has now happened 3 times, in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, Cebu, the Philippines, and Waitangi, New Zealand. Next year another dialogue session is being planned for Cambodia. It is greatly to the credit of these governments, and the 11 other nations that have participated, that they are doing something that will help us, and our societies, get ahead of the agenda and cooperate in useful ways to build peace in the region. It is a case of government leading by example.

Our dialogue, it is true, is part of much broader government strategies to combat violence and terrorism. Of course, these strategies contain many other, more widely publicised elements. What is new to us in Australia is the recognition that faith is integral to the successful functioning of a healthy society. Our government's initiative gives us a reason to show that our beliefs are not divisive, and that together we uphold essential human and community values. One of the first acts of the Regional Interfaith Dialogue was to affirm that we cannot sit idly by while things escalate, and violence breeds violence. There is no reason for us to passively accept the spill over of violence from other parts of the world. We acknowledge the initiative of governments to bring us together, but we realise that the outcomes must be generated, and shared, by the religious groups themselves.

When he began the 2004 Dialogue in Yogyakarta, Dr. Syamsuddin, who was our facilitator, drew our attention to negative developments in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and the subsequent emergence of global terrorism. The task for today, he said, was to work together to handle our problems, and to discuss the role of religion in society as a problem solver.

At the same meeting, the Australian Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, remarked: *"We see this as a very important first step towards building confidence and understanding between the various faiths of our region.... I think we are setting an example not just to ourselves in the region but to the world that it is possible to get representatives of all of the major religions together and for them to sit down and to talk about common values that they share, which all of those faiths have, and then to transmit their positive values to the people who follow those different faiths round the region."*

The Australian Dialogue group contains Christians (Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants), Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and Hindus. While other religions are practised in Australia, these are the largest and best known. In selecting the team, our government has acted as a catalyst and 'honest broker'. That is, on the one hand it has made something possible that otherwise could not have happened, and on the other hand, it has given us freedom to speak and act as we see fit. The minister has given no instructions nor made any demands to restrict us, or to make us feel in any way compromised in terms of our faith and conviction.

This level of trust between government, politics, and religion is remarkable. Australia is a strongly secular democracy, and it has always been said that religion and politics do not mix. This new situation demonstrates the honest intent of governments to enable dialogue, but not to control it. It creates a new space for successful co-operation between religious bodies and secular governments in working for the good of society and peace in the region. This is surely part of the mandate of government, and part of the moral

responsibility of religion. Government brings resources which religious bodies find in short supply. Religious bodies bring global communities of faith, diversity, and deep conviction that are beyond the province of secular governments. Together, they work for peace, and those of us involved believe this is the way God would have us act.

Minister Downer described it in this way: *Of course the war against terrorism and against violence and extremism is fought in different ways... Obviously in the past there have been military and police components, there's law and order components, there are legislative components, there are multilateral, bilateral, regional components ... and I think we have made a great deal of progress as a region in addressing some of these issues... But ... there's another component and that is to empower as much as we possibly can, moderate voices including moderate voices of faith, moderate religious leaders and this process is I think in time going to make a very strong contribution to that particular task.*

In the event it didn't take long before the Dialogue participants rejected the term 'moderate' as an external political term that does not adequately describe what we are about. The governments in their turn accepted this criticism in good grace, with the result that there has been a dialogue not just between religions but between religion and government. There has also been dialogue within religions, because we can't assume that all Muslims, or all Hindus, or Christians, or Buddhists, know each other across national borders and regional boundaries. One of the first things to collapse in Dialogue is the assumption that other religions are somehow monoliths with a single structure, view, or purpose. We all come to realise that the diversity we know in our own household of faith is reflected in other faith communities as well. When you bring together national groupings as diverse as Burma, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Australia, and so on, people from within the same religious grouping come from vastly divergent ethnicities, backgrounds, and cultures, and it takes time for them to get to know each other.

The Dialogue has also encouraged understanding within national groupings. The leading Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, Christians and Hindus involved have travelled together, eaten together, got to know each other, and take a certain pride in being part of the dialogue team. For us, it has been beneficial having participants such as Cardinal George Pell and Sister Trish Madigan working alongside the President of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, and the Buddhist Federation. Although many of us know each other from local dialogues within Australia, in this international setting it has helped us reinforce common goals, as we set about writing reports, planning and moderating sessions, and negotiating with our government support team.

The latest dialogue, in May 2007, took place in Waitangi, New Zealand, under the title, '*Building Bridges*'. Being in New Zealand, our attention was naturally directed a little more towards the Pacific. Our region is vast, and participants from the South Pacific remind us that their 'continent' is larger than Europe, yet it is mostly water. Communication and transport are critical issues. The inclusion of the Pacific in the dialogue process not only adds diversity but it confronts us with the realities of populations that are the first to suffer from the duress of climate change. They are learning to leave behind the paternalism of the missionary days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and a very recent colonial past. This is something they share in common with many of the SE Asian nations involved in the dialogue. The Dialogue meetings are remarkable gatherings where the stark realities of peace building and community harmony are never far away.

In the plan of action developed at Waitangi, delegates committed themselves to a range of activities in regard to their ongoing relationships, education, and the media. These have been recurring themes over the four years of dialogue, and areas where each country, and each religion, has been having issues. The dialogues are particularly concerned that religious groups get to know one another and so break down the stereotypes and caricatures that can easily lead to demonisation, division, and violence. They emphasise effective faith education for the young, not just in their own faith,

but in understanding that of others. They also want to plan for better training of the media in faith related issues "*to deepen inter-cultural understanding, and promote community values*". For our part, the Australian government has been supporting these objectives with exchange programs that include bringing groups of overseas academics, imams, journalists, and others to Australia to meet and discuss with their counterparts in Australia. I am aware of this particularly in the case of countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, and I am sure there are others. Another project delegates want to undertake is the establishment of an Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue network for the exchange of information about interfaith projects.

There will be more time to answer specific questions about the Dialogue and its outcomes after the initial speeches. For now, let me end by emphasising that what we are doing in these regional Dialogues is, we believe, significant. It marks the beginning of a new attitude which will help bring us together, rather than separate us. It also marks the beginning of a new partnership between government and religion, in which each respects the other's role, and we learn to work together for values that are important to the whole of society, and global humanity in general.

*John Henderson*  
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