



Dr. Syeed second from the left in the second row, in a crowd of 600 religious leaders of the world in Vienna

Every 5-6 years, *Religions for Peace* convenes a World Assembly of senior-most religious leaders for the purpose of forging a deep moral consensus on contemporary challenges, electing a new World Council, and advancing multi-religious action across and beyond the *Religions for Peace* network. Dr. Sayyid M. Syeed and Dr. Mohamed Elsanousi represented ISNA at the World Assembly. Dr. Syeed was elected Vice President for the World Council along with Shaikh Ben Beyyah to be the new Muslim representatives on the Council.

During the Assembly, Syeed served on the Committee to draft the final declaration which was approved by the general assembly. Here is the declaration:

<http://www.rfp.org/sites/default/files/publications/Vienna%20Declaration%20-%20Final.pdf>

**The Vienna Declaration
Welcoming the Other — A Multi-Religious Vision of Peace**

***Religions for Peace* 9th World Assembly 22 November 2013
Vienna, Austria**

We — more than six hundred religious leaders and people of faith representing all historic faith traditions and every region of the world — have convened in Vienna, Austria as the 9th World Assembly of *Religions for Peace*.¹ We have come from the global *Religions for Peace* family of ninety national inter-religious councils and groups, five regional councils, one world council, and international networks of religious women and religious youth. Our respective religious traditions have called us to work together for Peace.

Previous World Assemblies of *Religions for Peace* have discerned positive elements of Peace, common threats to Peace, and a multi--religious consensus expressed through shared values for Peace. We commit to common action based upon these deeply held and widely shared values, as a foundation for affirming the imperative of “welcoming the other” as the heart of our multi--religious vision of Peace.

We reaffirm the positive elements of Peace shared by our respective religious traditions:

- Peace is central to our respective religions, and our diverse faiths compel us to work together to build it;
- Love, compassion and honesty are stronger than hate, indifference and deceit;
- All men and women are endowed with human dignity, share common humanity, must care for one another, and are called to consider the problems faced by others as their own;
- We accept the call to stand on the side of and raise up the most vulnerable, and to promote just and harmonious societies;
- We value women and men as equal partners in our efforts to build peace;
- Children are a paramount concern; the special state of childhood deserves our protection and care, and should receive priority from among our societies’ resources;
- Non--violent conflict transformation through dialogue and reconciliation are central to peacemaking;
- The use of nuclear weapons and all weapons of mass and indiscriminate destruction is immoral; and
- Advancing human development and protecting the earth are part of the struggle for Peace.

The positive elements of Peace we share are inextricably linked to our shared calling to confront common threats to Peace. These threats include:

- The misuse of religion in support of all manner of violence, including violent extremism;

¹ *Religions for Peace*, the world’s largest multi--religious organization, includes Baha’i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Indigenous, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Shinto, Taoist and Zoroastrian religious leaders.

- An ongoing spiritual crisis that erodes values that support life;
- Violent conflict and the proliferation of arms;

- Extreme and growing inequality, including widespread violations of basic rights;
- Violence against women, abuse of children and weakening support for families;
- Extreme poverty, preventable diseases left untreated, and broad scale lack of opportunity; and
- Environmental degradation, natural resource depletion, and climate change, all of which threaten civic order and human flourishing.

While we confess that some religious believers betray the peace teachings of their faiths, we continue to commit ourselves — and our communities — to a culture of Peace that advances shared well-being, grounded in common healing, common living and shared security.

Rising Hostility

The 9th World Assembly of *Religions for Peace* calls attention to a new threat to Peace — rising hostility.

We are deeply troubled by this rising hostility, in society and within and among religious communities. This hostility toward the “other” is an extension of intolerance, and too often takes the form of violence. Victims of hostility are often vulnerable populations, including members of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities; migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced and stateless persons.

Hostilities arise from all sectors of society — governments, individuals, organizations and social groups. Although freedom of religion or belief is increasingly valued internationally, a growing number of governments are placing restrictions on religious beliefs and practices. Often, some religions are placed in an inferior status in relation to others. Sectarian and communal violence is dividing societies, fueling conflict, destroying innocent lives. Social hostility toward individuals and groups, fuelled by intolerance and fear of the “other,” threatens human dignity, good governance and shared well-being. More and more, people are persecuted because of their faith.

Intolerance and violence in all manifestations are obstacles to Peace. They seriously exacerbate other grave threats to Peace. Religious communities must confront hostility toward the “other” as both an urgent threat and also a key to tackling other critical threats to Peace.

“Welcoming the Other” — A Multi-Religious Vision of Peace

Our multi-religious vision of Peace includes the call to all people of faith to “welcome the other.” Each of our diverse faith traditions calls for profound active solidarity with, and empathy for, the “other” rooted in a spirit of unity, as a deeply held and widely shared value among our religious communities. “Welcoming the other” means respect and acceptance of one another.

We support the robust promotion of tolerance, a principle that is fostered by recognizing universal human rights and is essential for welcoming the other.

“Welcoming the other” both strengthens and goes beyond tolerance by calling each religious community to stand in solidarity with the dignity, vulnerability and well-being of the “other,” with the full force of its respective spiritual and moral teachings. Such teachings are specific to each religious tradition. They include: striving for justice, accepting self-sacrifice for the well-being of others, bearing innocent suffering, returning good for evil, seeking and extending forgiveness and expressing unrestricted compassion and love.

“Welcoming the other” calls us to work to advance the full flourishing of human dignity through the holistic development of human beings.

Building on previous Assembly Declarations, we recognize that “welcoming the other” invites every person into the co-building, co-nurturing and co-stewarding of our shared well-being, which includes respecting nature and developing in harmony with it. Stewardship of the earth is a solemn religious obligation.

Religious communities working together can be powerful actors to prevent violence before it erupts, diffuse conflict when it occurs, and lead their communities to rebuild war-torn societies. Excessive resources devoted to arms are better spent to alleviate poverty, advance education and basic healthcare for all, and address environmental challenges. “Welcoming the other” involves seeing ourselves in each other. To facilitate this, we must teach nonviolence, conflict prevention strategies, and the universal value of Peace to our children. Our shared positive vision of Peace grounds for us a human right to Peace.

We can welcome the other by advancing a more robust notion of citizenship that acknowledges basic human rights, including freedom of religion or belief.

Religious communities welcome the other when they work together to advance human development that respects the earth. “Welcoming the other” rejects complicity in the destruction of the earth, which aggravates disasters and human distress. The preservation of our air, soil and water is essential for human survival and well-being. Development should honor the continuity of life, preserving nature for the benefit of present and future generations.

Our respective religious communities can become centers of religious education on “welcoming the other.” To do this, we must reclaim our own religious teachings that call us to welcome the other, widely share them among our respective faith communities, including our young people, and put them into practice.

Religious communities can work to reverse the rising tide of hostility toward the “other” by advancing a multi-religious vision of Peace and through multi-religious action. Specifically, the *Religions for Peace* World Assembly calls on:

1) *Religious leaders and people of faith to:*

- Honor and protect human dignity whenever and wherever it is under attack;
- Foster more active collaboration between women and men in exalting the dignity of women and girls, and work together to prevent violence against them;
- Speak out on behalf of vulnerable individuals and groups, and all people persecuted, or whose existence is denied, because of their faith;

- Recognize that the well-being of immediate and extended families, as well as of communities, are a prerequisite to the well-being of children;
- Address issues of responsibility and accountability for the causes of climate change;
- Acknowledge the value of youth-led, grass-roots initiatives aimed at welcoming others and promoting sustainable Peace;
- Advance spiritual values essential to shared well-being;
- Reinforce acceptance of diversity in our communities;
- Welcome the other through prayer and service;
- Engage in multi-stakeholder partnerships to welcome the other; and
- Leverage the power of multi-religious networks to “welcome the other” by advancing human dignity, shared well-being and citizenship through concrete multi-religious action.

2) *Governments, international organizations and civil society* to:

- Promote transparent governance that ensures and protects the development of comprehensive well-being and full enjoyment of universal human rights for all;
- Provide legal remedies for victims of intolerance;
- Promote social policies and legal norms that recognize the dignity of migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced and stateless persons;
- Advance citizenship that ensures human dignity while protecting the safety and well-being of all individuals, including freedom of religion or belief, and other rights of individuals and groups, whether in the majority or in the minority;
- Ensure the protection of places of worship;
- Eliminate nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, and stem the proliferation of small arms;
- Promote restorative justice to heal both the victims and the perpetrators of violent conflict;
- Address threats of nuclear exposure and contamination to protect all living things and future generations; and
- Support and partner with people of faith, religious leaders, religious communities, and religious networks in their efforts to welcome the other.

3) *All people of good will* to:

- Call attention to, and work to eliminate, all forms of intolerance and discrimination by states, by non-state actors, by civil society, by religious groups and leaders, and by individuals.
- Welcome the other.

We, the Delegates of the 9th World Assembly of *Religions for Peace*, are united in our commitment to resist threats to Peace that take the form of hostility toward the other, and to take positive action to welcome the other by promoting the true flourishing of all human beings. These dual commitments and corresponding calls to action express our multi-religious vision of Peace.

Vienna, Austria 22 November 2013

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