



United Nations General Assembly
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Item 45: Culture of peace

Statement by Senator Kerry O'Brien
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(Check against delivery)

Mr President,

Nothing is more important to our future and to the wellbeing of our respective peoples than encouraging a global culture of peace.

Australia is committed to the proactive pursuit of peace and understanding, including through a range of policies and initiatives that encourage positive relations between and among peoples.

In this respect, Australia continues to attach great importance to interfaith cooperation as a means of promoting mutual respect, understanding and tolerance among different religions and cultures across our region.

As Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, said earlier this year “Some say there is no place for faith in the 21st century – they are wrong. Some say that faith is the enemy of reason – also they are wrong. Because faith and reason are great partners in human history and in our human future.”

For the United Nations, this is an historic day. To have the leaders of different faiths coming together, to talk about the need to utilise these different beliefs towards a better world is an occasion that will be remembered. The challenge now is to transform this into real outcomes affecting people’s lives.

We warmly welcome the Philippines’ leadership, and that of President Arroyo herself today, in promoting the United Nations Ministerial Meeting on Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace, which seeks to enhance understanding among civilisations, cultures and religions. Australia has now been accepted as a member of the Dialogue and looks forward to participating fully in its future meetings.

Australia also commends the role played by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and King Juan Carlos of Spain in promoting the inaugural World Inter-Faith Dialogue in Madrid from 16-19 July 2008. This event brought together nearly 300 religious leaders, scholars, clerics and representatives from many major faiths, and we welcome those of you who have come here today in New York as well.

The resulting Declaration on Inter-Faith Dialogue from Madrid embodies powerful themes - the idea of a dialogue of civilisations, the common values and ethics of religions and humanity, and the fundamental importance of respect, tolerance and understanding – that resonate with the hope of people around the world to live peacefully in harmony.

Australia is an active supporter of the Parliament of the World's Religions, one of the largest interfaith gatherings in the world. Through the periodic meeting of the world's spiritual and religious communities, this process aims to foster inter-religious understanding and cooperation. In 2009, Melbourne will host the next meeting of the Parliament.

In addition to these processes, Australia is committed to the work of the UN's Alliance of Civilizations (AoC), and joined its Group of Friends in 2007. The AoC is an international initiative to combat extremism by promoting cross-cultural and religious understanding with a focus on projects in the areas of media, youth, education and migration. In January 2008 Australia welcomed the opportunity to attend the inaugural Annual Forum of the Alliance in Madrid.

Australia and the European Union co-hosted a Youth Interfaith Forum in Australia in December 2007 in recognition of the important role young people need to play in furthering peace.

Mr President,

At a regional level, Australia has taken a lead role in fostering interfaith cooperation through the Regional Interfaith Dialogue - a process which we co-sponsor with Indonesia, New Zealand and the Philippines. The dialogue aims to bring people from diverse faith groups together in order to promote understanding between communities in the region and to focus the attention of religious leaders on their potential role in strengthening moderate voices within their communities.

The diverse mix of religions and cultures in South-East Asia means the region's leaders are uniquely placed to build trust and understanding between various religious and ethnic groups. But while Governments can and should play an important role in facilitating dialogue and understanding, it is religious leaders themselves who are best placed to work within their communities to build bridges at a community level. But by the same token, it is the responsibility of all those in the community – including political decision makers – to apply a values-based dialogue to all their activities.

The Regional Interfaith Dialogue, through the strong support of regional governments, has done this by providing the platform in which faith and community leaders come together to share their experiences.

Australia would like to pay tribute to the governments of Indonesia, the Philippines, New Zealand and Cambodia which have hosted the first four Regional Interfaith Dialogues. Australia looks forward to hosting the fifth Regional Interfaith Dialogue in 2009.

Mr President,

While the development of these regional and international initiatives has been enormously positive, Australia is also working domestically to strengthen social cohesion by enhancing respect, ensuring fairness and creating opportunities for participation in community life. It is not just between nations – or even between communities within those nations -- that we must foster peace and understanding, but within those communities as well.

Australia's National Action Plan to Build on Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security aims to build community resilience to extremism through initiatives promoting interfaith and intercultural education in schools, community cultural development and sporting activities, and human rights and anti-discrimination education. Over 150 initiatives have been supported through this program, including the establishment of a National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies.

The promotion of intercultural understanding and social harmony is of critical importance for this and future generations. Australia looks forward to continuing its work on interfaith dialogue and community cohesion, both domestically and with our international partners. Through this process we hope to engender an enduring global culture of peace, tolerance and diversity.

What is happening here today can't just be left to stand on its own. We must show how a broader understanding among cultures can address longstanding international disputes and differences, internal conflicts, and the oppression of the weak and powerless.

It is encouraging to hear world leaders today address this forum from a values-based perspective. However, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer – German pastor and theologian, who paid with his life for standing against the Nazi state and the Holocaust – once said, "Obedience to God's will may be a religious experience, but it is not an ethical one until it issues in actions that can be socially valued."

In that spirit, we particularly welcome the President of Israel's positive statement today in relation to the Arab peace initiative – "a serious opening for real progress". We hope this opportunity will be seized and endorsed by all.

But one word of warning. The fanatics standing against us, spreading hate, won't be easily deterred. Those of us advocating the way of peace must demonstrate that we are even more determined.