

United Nations Nations Unies

THE PRESIDENT OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

LE PRESIDENT DE L'ASSEMBLEE GENERALE

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Statement of H.E. Ms. Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa, President of the 61st Session of the General Assembly, at the Cathedral of St. John The Divine

Dear Congregation,

I am truly honored to be among you here today in this spectacular Cathedral. The Gothic, Byzantine-Romanesque architecture, and the seven chapels that represent the different immigrants is a visually profound testament, celebrating the coming together, the coexistence and the beauty of diversity.

On behalf of the 192 Member States I would like to extend my sincerest appreciation to the Very Reverend Dr. James Kowalski, for giving me the opportunity to participate in this service.

It has become a tradition to invite Presidents of the General Assembly early in the session to share their insights and vision. This initiative pays homage to the indispensable work of the United Nations in maintaining international peace and security, protecting human rights, fostering sustainable development and upholding the rule of law. In fact, it not only underlines the common endeavor that religious institutions share with the United Nations, rather it confirms the need to forge stronger partnerships that raise awareness, monitor and implement development programs and peace initiatives.

Throughout history, cultures and civilizations were shaped not only by political and economic forces but even more deeply by religious and spiritual forces. These religious and spiritual teachings have influenced the way humans conduct their lives, their ideas and belief systems much more than political revolutions.

In fact, if we trace the word "religion" to its Latin roots "religare", it means "harmony," "to unify," "bind together," "make whole." In Eastern languages the words for religion have the same or similar meanings. In Sanskrit, for example, one of the original meanings for dharma (eternal religion) is "to bind together the whole universe."

As religion may play a powerful role in conflict and war, by the same token, it can play an equally important if not greater role in building and sustaining systems of peace, human rights, social justice and ecological balance. In recent history, religion was the launching point for civil rights movement, the Independence of India, and the end of apartheid in South Africa. Leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu were deeply spiritual, grass-roots leaders that were able to speak so effectively to people's hearts and spirits and really make a difference.

In fact, the English Historian Arnold Toynbee found that spirituality and religion played a significant role in the rise and fall of civilizations. He identified over 20 major civilizations that were powered by religion and spiritual vision and when the leaders of these civilizations lost this vision their civilizations were doomed.

His definition of civilization, I think speaks to us all. He said and I quote "I should define civilization in spiritual terms, as an endeavor to create a society in which the whole of mankind will be able to live together in harmony as members of an all-inclusive family. This is the goal at which all civilizations so far known have been aiming, unconsciously, if not consciously" End of quote.

So far we have touched upon the more ideological and moral considerations of religion and spirituality. Yet its institutional capacity is just as important. The major world religions have global networks that filter through academic and medical institutions, local communities, and social projects. They can and often do operate across national borders with greater ease than many other actors.

They can play a significant role in development, emergency aid, and peace and security projects. They can contribute important scholarship and professional expertise to help resolve some of the gravest issues that confront humanity.

We come together here to re-affirm something that remains unchanged: the fundamental equality of all humans before God.

The United Nations stand in the center of the global endeavor to bring nations, cultures and religions together in order to build a world society that will live in peace upholding the shared principles of justice, human rights and mutual tolerance. At the General Assembly, we have, and continue to promote dialogue among civilizations through the various conferences and meetings that bring people from all over the world to exchange their experiences and understand each other better. We have adopted numerous resolutions that foster tolerance; that effectively promote the rights of persons belonging to national, ethnic, or religious minorities; that combat the defamation of religions; and that eliminate all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief.

We are gathered here to celebrate a more balanced perspective on religion, the perspective of people around the world, where religion gives them a set of beliefs and values, as well as an ultimate account of their place and purpose in the world.

We live in a world that is permeated by injustice, where violent conflicts, poverty, and disease cause untold suffering and give rise to pressing security and environmental concerns. Whether it is the horrific events of September 11th, the catastrophic damage of Hurricane Katrina or the devastating crises in the Middle East, these among many other endless tragedies that continue to afflict humanity, remind us of our limitations in our right to govern our lives...remind us of our

brothers and sisters that are suffering...invite us to question the mystery of suffering and explore its causes...

This is when we turn to God, when we struggle with notions that are bigger than us, notions we cannot explain let alone reconcile to provide us with the moral strength and the ethical guidance for living.

I am convinced that religious forces all around the world, each in its own merit, can advocate dialogue, reconciliation, and peace...where people can draw from common universal values the courage and strength to reach out to one another and embrace our differences so that we can live together in harmony.

I come from a region that has been subject to escalating violence. I struggle day and night seeking effective ways and means to resolve the endless and unnecessary suffering. Being a lawyer, I first consider the effectiveness of international law but we are beyond that stage. Perhaps "beyond" is not the right word. It is more fundamental than that. Many have lost hope, saying the wounds are too deep to heal. That is far too cynical, for if you are open to God and his love then you learn to forgive. This is what the region, the birthplace of the three major religions, needs to embrace, that of forgiveness. It is more powerful than any military might.

This seems clear to me now.

I am deeply influenced by St. Teresa of Avila. Her spiritual writings, her rich experience and journey to attain absolute purity continues to inspire me. In praying to God, she repeatedly said, "I do not fear any harm for you are by my side". I visited the town of Avila in Spain to see the church and the convent she lived in. I also visited the town of Alba de Tormes where she died and was buried.

In one of her most celebrated books, *The Interior Castle*, she reveals the path that helps one enter the soul and understand it, so one may better comprehend God and the other. And this is only achieved by love and forgiveness.

Only then will the soul become in her own words, "a small tree in the middle of a sweet spring, gaining its strength, foliage and fertility from its water".

Thank you
and may God guide us all.