

(Publicity)

G8 religious leaders summit

Religious leaders call for global partnership

Michael Shackleton
SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

Following in the footsteps of the G-8 foreign and finance ministers, the G8 Religious Leaders Summit took place June 27 to 29 in Osaka and Kyoto.

Approximately 50 foreign delegates and scholars, plus 100 Japanese religious leaders

met to discuss G-8 issues and send a common declaration to the G-8 leaders when they meet in Hokkaido on July 7 to 9. There was overwhelming agreement that the global crises the G-8 political leaders will address are all fundamentally issues concerning the human heart.

This was the third G8 Religious Leaders Summit and the event has now become one of the key assemblies in the interreligious dialogue calendar. The participants were welcomed by warm speeches from the vice minister of foreign affairs, the governor of Osaka and mayor of Kyoto.

Support organizations included the Ministry of the Environment, the Japan Committee of UNESCO, the National Federation of UNESCO Associations in Japan, the United Nations Association of Kansai, and the Kyoto Chamber of Commerce and Industry. So much secular support testifies to the realization that most people are religious, and religious leaders frequently command more respect and support than political leaders. Initiatives such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Kyoto Protocol began with the idea that gov-

ernment support is essential to complement them. As the weaknesses of government became apparent, the United Nations, the World Bank, and other such major representative institutions are increasingly also reaching out to engage with religions and religious leaders to understand, and heal the world's problems.

The participants did not come to engage in theological debate. It was not a missionary free-for-all or a moment to remind each other of religious conflict. The main theme of the summit was "Living with the Earth: Message from World Religions." The word "with" featured frequently in discussions because the answers to world problems will only come through appreciating how we are partners with each other, and with the rest of creation. What brought the religious leaders together was their sense of shared responsibility.

The common concerns of world faiths in three particular areas: living with nature, living with ethnic diversity and reckoning with Africa's problems.

The main meetings took place in the conference facilities of Osaka University and Doshisha University, but panel meetings and other events were held in beautiful religious surroundings such as Kamigamo Shrine or Nishi Hongwan-ji in Kyoto, or the Konkō Church of Izu in Osaka. In addition, there were visits to the ancient Shitennoji Temple in Osaka and the nearby Airin district, where the life of Japan's day laborers stands in stark contrast to the wealth and comfort so often associated with Japan.



Rev. Mitsuo Miyake



Welcoming words: Prince Samdech Norodom Sirivudh of Cambodia delivers a speech during the opening ceremony of the G8 Religious Leaders Summit in Osaka on June 27.



Interfaith outing: Participants of the G8 Religious Leaders

Religious leaders summit's proposal to leaders of the Group of Eight

This is the third communique from religious leaders to political leaders since the G-8 meetings began a decade ago.

Our commitment

There is a powerful symbolism in the venue of the G-8 summit this year being Japan, at a moment when the degree of concern for our global environment has finally reached critical mass in global popular consciousness. This is because, notwithstanding recent industrialization in Asia, the dharmic, pantheistic and ancestor traditions of Eastern societies remain a practical tool for mobilization in defense of the environment in spite of recent histories of rupture and loss.

But common to all our religious traditions is the belief that justice and the preservation of human rights, including gender parity, must be given primacy. In the interests of mutual prosperity and coexistence, every possible measure should be taken to avert wars.

1 Living with nature

The current global environmental crisis has so heightened fears around the world that many are considering sincerely whether we can survive on Earth. Species diversity is being lost at a rate one thousand times faster than that in the era of dinosaur extinction. The note of emergency around climate change is heard from the joint science academies of the G-8, who have said: "A step-change in our response is needed, with action at global, national and local levels. Local actors must be engaged in impact assessment and in identifying solutions."

We therefore now commit our resources and mobilizing power to the transition to a low-carbon society, and the innovations that the just-held G-8 environment ministers' meeting in Kobe has declared will be necessary for all countries in their lifestyle, production and consumption patterns, and social infrastructure (chair's summary). These innovations will undergird the technological innovations that must be brought to bear. We shall seek to qualify materialism and consumerism, control the

overloading of desire to the point of the destruction of nature, and reflect life's brilliance by moving the hearts of our followings to prayer for the happiness and flourishing of others, and the showing of mercy by the powerful.

2 Ethnic and religious diversity

The cosmos, as the divine creation, is decorated with the enormous beauty named "diversity." Diversity is most spectacularly expressed in ethnic and religious cultures. Therefore no authority, religious or secular, is given the right to negate this sacred endowment.

Throughout our history, humankind has repeated the same mistake, of annihilating diversity under the pattern of the strong oppressing the weak. Fortunately, our modern sensibility recognizes this as inhumane, and contrary to the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (celebrating its 60th anniversary this year). Yet we witness today in many instances, on every continent, situations of social and political oppression that totally violate the principle of due admiration for divine diversity—Tibet and Myanmar most recently. There are also cross-cutting issues such as promoting gender equity and closing the wealth gap. Rather than blaming others, however, we should feel profound pain at our own implication in these tragedies. To ignore tragic incidents in our global community is irresponsible, and ultimately denial of the divine. It then becomes clear what we have to do. In the spirit of optimism and countering any mood of despair, religious people commit themselves to be part of the solution, to pray and to act with compassion for all victims. We seek to be considered equal partners in the solution of these entangled problems.

3 Africa: reckoning with poverty

Africa continues to be plagued by neocolonialism, reproducing various forms of poverty that in turn create and compound the environmental and political problems. Africa's future can take either direction: Its resource

potential means it holds the key as the "experimental" continent that could sway the future of the human race in the 21st century.

African poverty has been on the G-8 agenda since 2005. Recently, Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda of Japan received proposals stating that without education there can be no economic development in Africa. And the Japanese Science Academy has submitted proposals to this G-8 summit concerning the importance of higher education to lifestyle changes for transitioning to a low-carbon society. Accordingly, we religious leaders advocate the establishment of a Scholarship Foundation for wide-ranging mutual exchange of students between African and G-8 nations, so as to contribute to the fulfillment of the objectives discussed in this G-8 summit.

This particular recommendation reflects the critical necessity of education in the development of the global community. It is in complete accord with the substance and spirit of Just Participation: A Call from Cologne, the statement of our 2007 summit, with its emphasis on the Millennium Development Goals as an ongoing basis for conversation between global religious and political leaders.

Conclusion

In common with many today, we are concerned about "short termism." The kinds of long-term responsibility and accountability by which we shall save our children's future are not yet devised anywhere. This is a matter for the urgent attention of all in authority, and all thinking citizens, in the mere year we have until the next round of these meetings, when we must appraise ruthlessly what we have achieved for our ailing world, in these perilous times.

All religions hold life to be sacred and interconnected. Human beings, at the highest level of consciousness in the chain of the life process, have a responsibility to look after and care for the weak, the vulnerable, the less fortunate. This compels us to ask of you that you reformulate government policy to be fair to all life on Earth.

Probably, the single most tricky moment came when one of the most senior religious leaders present, the Khambo Lama from Mongolia, and the Dalai Lama's representative in Japan and East Asia, urged the summit to specifically call on the G-8 leaders to condemn the oppression of religious and other freedoms in Tibet and Myanmar. Many argued that to cite particular issues would, in fairness, require citing all such issues—such as the oppression of the Muslim minority in China.

Practical and faith-based answers, solutions

The following excerpts from presentations and interviews give a sense of the practical and engaged nature of the discussions.

Welcome comments:

Prince Norodom Sirivudh, privy counselor to the king, Cambodia; hon. president G8 RLS: "It is significant that I am a politician from Cambodia, which suffered so terribly from genocide. I know how crucial it is that G-8 leaders need to listen to spiritual voices, and consider the messages and recommendations of the G8 Religious Leaders Summit."

Ven. Yukei Matsunaga, president, G8 RLS 2008; chief abbot, Shitennoji Temple: "Our erstwhile political institutions are no longer capable of resolving these global issues on their own. We are at a stage that calls for the pooling of all the wisdom that humanity can muster. I believe that the time has come for all religious faiths, held dear in their many guises throughout the world since ancient times, to come to the fore as the essence of wisdom."



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Panel discussions:

Katherine Marshall, counselor to the president, World Bank; professor, Georgetown University: "Africa is the most religious continent in the world. A higher percentage of people are engaged in religion, and religious organizations provide on average 50 percent of health services and 40 percent of education. Yet G-8 documents hardly mention religion at all."

Tshoko Lhakpa, representative, His Holiness the Dalai Lama for E. Asia & Japan: "His Holiness the Dalai Lama has spoken of universal responsibility, we are all interdependent. We all speak of peace, justice and human rights, but when justice and human rights are threatened or trampled, we are hesitant about our reaction. This shows we have not understood the true essence of peace and justice. Speaking of the Tibetan issue, it is not an isolated issue, it is a global issue. It is a living symbol of nonviolent struggle for peace, justice and human rights. It is a window to the suffering and repression occurring on our planet."

Avian Ron Carmel, Hand in Hand Center for Jewish-Arab Education, Israel: "I am sending my children to one of the five integrated Jewish-Arab bilingual multicultural schools in Israel. At the end of the second year, a documentary was commissioned and shown to the parents and children. It began with a scene of Arab kids throwing stones at Israeli policemen. My daughter turned to me, 'Who are those people?' When I explained, she said, 'Daddy, don't joke with me.' When I said it was no joke, she said, 'It can't be. Jews and Arabs play together. They don't fight.' In many ways the biggest challenge has been for the parents, when we chat as we wait to pick up our children or try to open up to each other in the local coffee shops. As parents, we all come from strictly monocultural backgrounds. Very soon the first children

will be graduating, and entering college and wider society. Some must do compulsory military service. How will that impact them? What will their impact be?"

Sheikh Abdullah F. Al-Lheedan, asst. deputy minister of Islamic affairs, Saudi Arabia: "God said in the Holy Quran, 'O Mankind! We have created you from a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honorable of you with God is the most righteous of you.' As such Islam rejects racism and calls for cooperation among mankind. Islam has made clear that varieties of human culture are of divine wisdom. God said in the Quran, 'And if your Lord wanted he could make mankind one nation, still they would dispute and for that he created them (Hude 118).' So differences of culture, race and language must not lead to war. Rather the variety of culture is essential for mankind to complete one another."



Dr. Sheikh Abdullah F. Al-Lheedan

We are assisting in G8 Religious Leaders Summit 2008 in Japan

Lord George Carey
Former Archbishop of Canterbury

My dear friends and colleagues, I am so sorry that I am unable to be with you but your hugely important gathering clashes with a fixed date in my diary that I was unable to cancel. However, I send you my warmest greetings through my very good friend, Mr. Handa.



As I've traveled throughout the world as archbishop of Canterbury and beyond, I've been struck by the commonness of our humanity and by all that brings us together as people. In a world of too many divisions, boundaries and borders, we are united by love of our families and communities, and the earnest desire to leave our world better for our children.

As the world's leaders gather in Japan for their annual summit, I hope and pray they will divine better ways of promoting peace, justice and equity in a world torn by war, and challenged by plagues of violence, virulence, disease and

poverty. The world's religious leaders gathering before and during the G-8 meeting stand in support of governments even as they work together to learn better ways of promoting interfaith dialogue, and of working together toward common goals of a world free of poverty and suffering.

In a world where environmental and security threats are omnipresent, let us take these moments to commit to working together to overcome fear, and to work together to make the world a better and more just place for all.

With my warmest greetings and sincere good wishes.

Mary Robinson
President, Realizing Rights
Former President, Republic of Ireland

Human rights belongs at the very heart of your deliberations.

World religious leaders and G-8 nation leaders meet in Japan at a momentous moment, marking the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These gatherings thus offer a unique chance to realize these rights and, by that means, our shared goals of peace and social justice.

Our ideals for human rights, so often affirmed by world leaders, are noble. Sadly, however, they are far from reality for billions of the world's citizens. These face the insecurity and indignity of war, violence and poverty, and even in this prosperous 21st century, hunger, death from preventable disease, and threats to the natural world that nourishes us and affords us beauty and inspiration.

Of all the issues before you, I hope you will keep women constantly at the



forefront, looking to each proposed measure through a lens that asks how it will improve the lives of the poorest women, far distant from the centers of power. You can act to make rights for young girls everywhere as natural as the rising and setting of the sun, and truly improve their lives.

And as you deliberate on the challenges of looming climate change, the rights of the poor to fairness, equity and a chance at a life with dignity belong at the very center.

I believe deeply that the best times for humankind lie before us. You can advance this shared dream by realizing rights.

His Eminence Dr. Ali Gomaa
The Grand Mufti of Egypt

The environmental crisis is a global problem that demands our attention. Leaders of faith-based communities have a special responsibility to educate their followers about the moral imperative to protect the environment of which we have been made stewards.

The Almighty has bestowed upon us trust. The Islamic tradition teaches that God presented this responsibility to the earth and the skies, to the mountains and the seas, and it was only humanity that agreed to take it upon itself. It is our duty now to live up to this responsibility, a responsibility that is also an honor and a manifestation of the dignity of humankind. Only by working to make the world a safer, cleaner and more prosperous habitat will we succeed in fulfilling this divine mandate. From the Islamic perspective, one of the five goals of religion is to protect life in every form. The road ahead of us is long and hard, and we must do everything in our capacity to carry out this work. Let us hope that this gathering and others like it will be a step toward achieving this goal.

It is time that the leaders of world religious traditions come together, not just to a dialogue to develop an international constitution of coexistence through which we can learn to



live together peacefully in the world as practitioners and believers of different faiths. Not only by doing this we can curb extremist talk and actions. We must take a collective and unequivocal stance against terrorism and killing innocent civilians. We must speak out loud and clear against racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia or any other form of discrimination.

By starting here we will send a clear message to those who harbor evil tendencies that they must fight the demons inside themselves, and use the moral strength of religion to help come out from the darkness and into the light. It will be a call for the world to come to peace, and a first step toward rights being returned to their proper owners, and for all human beings to respect each other as fellow human beings.

Thank you.

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