

The Role of Religion in the Fight Against the Coronavirus Pandemic

A Joint Statement by Representatives of Various Religions and Interfaith Organizations

New Delhi - 21 April 2020

During the past couple of months our planet has entered into a public health crisis of unprecedented magnitude and intensity. Well over two million have been infected with the coronavirus, more than a hundred thousand individuals have succumbed to the disease and the impact of this pandemic on the economy and society is as yet too great to be estimated. In all this disruption and despair, religion has often been referred to in both positive and negative contexts. On the one hand, at this time of uncertainty people have turned to religion for hope, strength and spiritual stamina. Faith has inspired in people a sense of solidarity and a desire to serve others, especially the most vulnerable. At the same time, the name of religion has also been used to emphasize a sense of separateness and exclusivity, to cultivate prejudice, and to reject science and espouse superstition.

At this time of unprecedented crisis, when the need of the hour is for united action to overcome this great peril, the statements and prescriptions made in the name of religion must be well-founded and consistent. They must not create confusion on how this pandemic must be addressed or contradict established scientific advice. It is in response to this urgent imperative that we, the representatives of various faiths and interfaith groups are issuing this statement to reiterate those principles common to all religions that have the greatest bearing on our response to the present crisis. We appeal to those of all religions to unite in a common commitment to these principles and, in the larger national interest, to put aside their differences. After all, religion is probably the most powerful means for mobilizing human conscience to serve the common good. It would be an unpardonable loss if the resources of faith are left scattered and in disarray and not allowed to come together as a singular force to lend impetus to this collective endeavor.

At the outset we would like to affirm that if, at this time, religion is to speak with one voice we must agree on the common foundations of all religions. Although every religion bears the distinct stamp of its particular history and the geographical setting in which it appeared, the essential spiritual and moral teachings of all religions are one. All religions have come with the purpose of developing the moral and spiritual capacities latent in human nature and in building societies where these capacities can flourish and be channelized to advance society's wellbeing. Although the social teachings, laws and rituals of different religions have differed based on changing historical needs and circumstances, they ultimately can be seen to serve the same purpose of advancing humanity's collective maturity. This understanding of the essential oneness of religion provides the foundation on which people of all religions can learn to draw upon a common spiritual heritage to fight collective challenges. It also provides an unassailable basis for rejecting religious prejudices which, as recent events in the country have shown, can flare up during times of crisis and aggravate social tensions.

The most vital principle of religion that needs to be emphasized at this time is the oneness of all human beings. At the heart of all religions is a spiritual conception of the human being which transcends the material body. This spiritual reality, which is referred to as the soul, is the source of divine attributes and virtues which allow human beings to demonstrate

altruistic, selfless and other-regarding behaviors. It is this spiritual nature that constitutes the essential identity of the individual and it is because of this fundamental identity common to all, that human beings are considered as one by the scriptures of the world's religions. Religion further teaches the ideal that all of humanity are interconnected and interdependent even as the members of one family and the cells of one body. *"Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other,"* states the Bahá'í writings. *"He who experiences the unity of life sees his own Self in all beings, and all beings in his own Self, and looks on everything with an impartial eye"*, wrote Lord Buddha. *"He alone sees truly who sees the Lord the same in every creature...seeing the same Lord everywhere, he does not harm himself or others,"* says Lord Krishna. *"You shall love your neighbour as yourself,"* are the words of the Torah. *"No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us"*, are the words of Jesus Christ. Similarly, one reads in the Quran, *"show kindness to parents, and to kindred, and orphans, and the needy, and to the neighbour that is a kinsman and the neighbour that is a stranger, and the companion by your side, and the wayfarer..."*

Today, the spread of coronavirus provides a testament to the oneness and interconnectedness of the human family where the well-being of one is dependent on the well-being of all. As the past few weeks have shown, among the biggest obstacles that stand in our way as we strive to find a way out of this crisis is the tendency to be selfish or self-centered whether as an individual, a community or a nation. The age-old habit of dividing the world into an 'us' and a 'them' (many times evoked in the name of religion) and of restricting the sphere of concern to the particular ingroup to which we belong, has shown to be a dangerous and life-threatening delusion in the context of the present crisis.

Closely linked to the principle of the oneness of humankind is the injunction to give expression to one's love for the Creator and for humanity in selfless and sacrificial service to the common weal. To be meaningful, service has to be in the context of addressing the needs and challenges of humanity in the present world. To be religious then is to be an active servant of humankind in the here and now, to use one's talents and capacities to address contemporary challenges and to contribute to the well-being of all without distinction. No greater embodiments of this spirit of selfless and sacrificial service can be found than those doctors, health workers, policemen, media persons and government functionaries who, at great risk to their personal lives, are carrying out their duties. There is little doubt that when many of these valiant individuals contemplate in the privacy of their conscience the risk they court on a daily and hourly basis in the line of duty, it is from their spiritual convictions that they find the strength to sustain their efforts and firm their resolve. In the days, weeks and months ahead, many others will be called upon to make sacrifices and to render services, however small, for the well-being of the whole. Indeed, the very act of those law-abiding citizens to scrupulously adhere to the norms of social distancing and willingly accept the restrictions placed on their social and economic lives, can be considered a vital form of service to the whole.

Finally, a word of clarification is in order about the cases of religious fanaticism, superstition and contempt for science that are being expressed in the name of religion in the context of the pandemic. These have done incalculable harm not only by exposing thousands to the virus but also by vitiating public discourse with half-truths, falsehoods, conspiracy theories and doomsday narratives which hang as a thick cloud of gloom over the hearts and minds of

people and obscure clarity of thought. What dispels this darkness is the principle that true religion must be in harmony with science and acceptable to reason. Religion enunciates the laws and principles of spiritual reality the same way that science has helped us discover the laws that govern the material world. To advance in both the spiritual and material aspects of life, humanity needs both science and religion. Religion, in its true form advocates the principle of the independent investigation of the truth. Every soul has the duty to independently know and understand spiritual reality guided by reason and not by relying on blind imitation. Similarly, there is the need to distinguish religion from superstition which is based on ignorance. Although this difference is not always easy to establish, it is vital that the distinction be recognized and upheld so that statements made in the name of religion are subject to critical analysis and to the test of reason. Failing this, there is the danger that religious discourse become a platform for all kinds of fantastical, magical or even harmful ideas to find acceptance and unthinking endorsement. Unless such a critical posture is fostered with regard to various claims made in the name of religion, people will be vulnerable to manipulation by those who out of a desire for leadership or power might seek to misdirect the religiosity of the people towards superstition and fanaticism.

By stating the above, we do not wish to suggest that the vastness and immensity of religion as a system of knowledge and practice can be reduced to a few principles. Rather, our intention in focusing on these principles is to draw out from the ocean of guidance in each religion those teachings that are most relevant to unifying us in our response to the crisis at hand. We also do not claim that these are the only teachings of religion that apply to the present crisis – there could be many others which scholars of religion can identify and discuss in what can hopefully become a vibrant discourse on the role of religion in promoting the common good. However, the urgency of this critical hour compels us to share these initial thoughts without further delay.

Our faith in an all-loving Creator and in the nobility of the human race convinces us that humanity will emerge from this ordeal stronger and more united, with a deeper appreciation of its inherent oneness and interconnectedness.

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