The Institute of Ismaili Studies

"What is the Contribution of Religions to Peace?"
Remarks made at the XIIIth International Meeting of Peoples and Religions
Shams Vellani
Lisbon, Portugal, September 24-26, 2000

Abstract

"Religion" has been evoked both as a unifying and divisive force. Its role and value in public life has been inversely related to the resurgence of religion and spirituality in modern times, as a private, personal affair. This inner dimension of religion can be the first step in paving the way towards a more peaceful society and way of life. However, meaning is given to this inner commitment only through its externalisation, which can take the form, in some cases, of tolerance and openness. The role of the human being and the value placed upon human dignity is a point of convergence in religious traditions. By harnessing this common element and finding the means to articulate this and other shared values, religions, collectively and collaboratively, can act as agents of practical and meaningful social change.

The Religious Legacy

Much has been said, written and recorded in history about the role of 'religion' in laying the foundations for civilised life. A great deal has also been said, written and recorded about the conduct of people who, in the name of religion, have done and continue to do much to destabilise society. Both aspects of religion call for honest appraisal as an essential step in the search for a way forward: a path forward towards peace, through dialogue and joint action, if that path is to be illu83 Tc 0.788 Tw (search foring and the value placed upon human) Tj 0 TcUD /68 TD 86corc

The use of materials published on the Institute of Ismaili Studies website indicates an acceptance of the Institute of Ismaili Studies' Conditions of Use. Each copy of the document must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed by each transmission. For all published work, it is best to assume you should ask both the original authors and the publishers for permission to (re)use information and always credit the authors and source of the information.

© 2001 The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Religion, Humanism and Dignity

Like that of other traditions, Islam is, thus, an ethic of social inclusion, of a shared humanity. Indeed, the Qur'an refers to the diversity of human races and cultures, of languages and colours, as among the merciful signs of Allah. It affirms that each people have been given a direction and calls upon all to come together and strive for goodness.

What is the sustainable basis for this coming together and striving for goodness? All religions converge towards one essential message: respect for the dignity of the human person. Some traditions say that the human person is made in the image of God; some say that God has breathed His own spirit in the human person. From this common commitment to respect for human dignity spring the cluster of values, which constitutes, what we may call, a transcendent or universal or global ethic, and which defines our shared humanity. These are the values that provide a pragmatic framework for friendly dialogue, joint action where feasible and honourable disagreement, if necessary. But what gives strength to this pragmatic framework is the spiritual purpose of seeking to elicit the noble, which resides in every human being.

The Necessity for Religious Collaboration

The challenge to our society of religions is how to progress from an articulation of our universa

Let me end by a poignant narration from Prophetic tradition. On the day of judgement, Allah asks the son of Ad