

(Corrected speech transcribed from the Video)

## **International Conference of Religions and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's)**

7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> March 2019

The New Synod Hall, Vatican City

Beloved brothers and sisters allow me to begin with the Sikh greeting:

*Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh*

It is an honour and privilege to be with you. May God bless us all.

As a Sikh, I am a lifelong learner. *Sikhna* means to learn. My religion unambiguously informs me that we are created in God's image and God is the source of all goodness and all divine attributes. He is all in one, as a heavenly father, mother, brother, sister, relative, guide and protector. His is the divine force which enables and sustains existence, whose presence pervades and permeates everywhere. He is most powerful and forgiving. God's infinite mystery will remain incomprehensible to us finite beings.

From a Sikh perspective, a state of disconnection with God leaves us in a state of disconnection with our own selves, with others in the human family and with all of creation. It leaves us spiritually dehydrated. In our attempts to make a better world we must somehow lovingly perceive the Unseen. This, to my mind, is key to mobilising the degree of altruism, care and responsibility needed to meet the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Whilst we identify top-down technical solutions to tackle humanity's shared challenges, we must also consider how to **bring about a gear change in an inward, spiritual sense**. We must recognise that, for deep and enduring change, the human heart, mind and soul form our most vital, renewable and sustainable resource.

The need to add a spiritual dimension and foundation to the SDGs cannot be over emphasised. This would be directed at harnessing the **global spiritual capital** which collectively resides in every one of the 7.5 billion people who populate this planet. It also involves thinking of prosperity as more than economic wellbeing and of peace being more than the absence of war. From a Sikh perspective, to find true prosperity and peace involves fostering an inward richness and inward harmony to transform the outward conditions in which we all co-exist. In all of this, **partnerships are key**: partnering with the latent part of us which is sacred and divine; partnering with others from the family of faiths; forming visionary alliances and collaborations between religious and secular partners. I will now elaborate on some of the challenges I see ahead.

**The first challenge** is the imperative for more sustained meaningful engagement between governments, civil society, religious leaders and the communities they represent. The suggestion is that all these relevant stakeholders must be permanently connected and integrated into the work of the UN system, on the basis of equitable and effective partnerships. This would entail reform and structural change with regards to the UN's engagement with faith and faith leaders, perhaps best achieved through an Interreligious Advisory Council to the UN Secretary-General. Collectively, this will provide an unparalleled capacity to foster a

disposition of inclusivity and make available faith-inspired conceptual resources that have hitherto been marginalised.

**The second challenge** is the view that science is a threat to religion and vice versa. The two should rather be viewed as complimentary human pursuits which can be creatively fused for our collective wellbeing. In an era which is now increasingly recognised as post-secular, let us hope that innovative partnerships can be genuinely formed between secular and religious establishments, networks, organisations and institutions.

**A third challenge** lies in the use of language and terminology, when sacred texts and concepts are inadequately translated, misinterpreted and misused. This is not conducive to cultivating interreligious engagement and peace-building.

**A fourth challenge** is the long-ingrained perceived supremacy of one faith over another. Historically, this has created obstacles to genuine, productive dialogue and collective action. We must learn to be humble. This is achieved through sustained *sewa*, meaning selfless service to others.

**A fifth challenge** is the need to direct energies beyond the task of tending to one's flock only. We must cultivate a sincere spirit of going beyond ourselves and serving others flocks also for the common good.

**A sixth challenge** is the lack of support to promote inter-religious dialogue. A great many organisations have struggled to make progress. Governments need to be advised to set aside funds and create budgets for interfaith collaboration and action. The need to collectively strategize and formulate relevant policies is essential. Interfaith dialogue has led to many declarations; the time has come to translate these into concrete vision.

The **seventh challenge** is the need for good leadership. Good, honest leaders must embody the qualities of good human beings. Simply put, these include: being compassionate, merciful, forgiving, truthful and accountable; being content, exercising humility and an abundance of love. All faith leaders must be genuine practitioners of their faith. There is no room for hypocrisy. They must remain humble, guided by the sense that they are in the service of God and God's children. They should be worthy role models, combining competence and astuteness with selflessness and benevolence, together with an intuition for good, quick decision-making.

By mobilising shared common values for the delivery of the SDGs, it is important to have sincere and serious **quality and depth of intention**. The need to imbue in ourselves these unseen qualities is vital; superficial intention will lead us nowhere. We are all of us mortal beings who arrive on and depart from the planet as spiritual migrants. Transforming our world also necessitates transforming our very own selves first. **To the three highlighted economic, social and environmental dimensions of development, we need to add a fourth vital dimension, which is that of spiritual development.** Spiritual development will greatly stimulate and accelerate action.

**Some observations on the 5 Ps:**

**People:** the 7.5 billion people on the planet are all children of one God. They are thus brothers and sisters, literally kith and kin. We should not despise, belittle, condemn, mock, exploit, ridicule and hate them. This does not honour and uphold human dignity nor does this lead to practicing equality. It renders us lesser human beings.

**Planet:** from the Sikh perspective the planet on which we are transitorily domiciled is to be viewed as a *dharamsal*, a sacred place of worship. In the Sikh morning prayer, we are informed: '*Pavan pani agni patal, tis vich dharti thaap rakhi dharamsal*'; the whole planet is a sacred place of worship, a school where we learn to practice *dharam* (or religion). For Sikhs this practice includes the three daily activities of prayer, service and singing God's praises.

**Peace:** Inner peace is a precursor to external peace-building. Acknowledging God as the Giver of all life cannot be ignored in our human endeavours. In relation to our peace-building efforts, allow me to mention a proposed *Charter for Forgiveness and Reconciliation* that we have been working on together with a group of committed colleagues for a number of years. It aims to raise awareness **that to have peace and sustainable development we need to forgive and reconcile. This must take place globally in ALL spheres of human relationships - within families, communities and wider society.**

### Concluding remarks

Bhai Gurdas Ji - the revered Sikh scribe and spiritual poet *par excellence* who lived during the time of the Gurus - informs us that Guru Nanak Dev Ji's advent in 1469 stemmed from a '*pukaar*' - a cry of help from the world, anguishing under the strain of human vice, lack of gratitude and ignorance. Today, once again the planet's cry for help is real. It is being felt and heard loud and clear around us. To address this, more than technical solutions, transforming our mindsets and consciousness, is vital.

Since only humans, can deliver the SDGs, it is incumbent that we formulate loving, spiritual, transformational human goals to bring about a change in our human consciousness through value-led education. Actions will only be as good as the actors involved.

In closing, please allow me to share a brief prayer from our scriptural teachings. It draws a picture of the lamentable scenario of our suffering world. In an inter-religious spirit, it implores God to set us free from the hold of vices which hinder our flourishing, no matter what our backgrounds are as children of God:

***The whole world is suffering; engulfed in the flames of many destructive forces, such as blind lust, merciless revenge, insatiable greed and the soul-destroying ego. We plead to you, God, through your mercy, please protect and save us. No matter which door or sanctuary or place of worship we come from, take us into your fold and refuge.***

Thank you.

Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh