



الكنيسة الإنجيلية اللوثرية في الأردن والأراضي المقدسة
The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

“The Role of Religion Today”
Acceptance Speech for the
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My dear friends,

It is my great pleasure to be here with you today. I greet you from the Holy City of Jerusalem, sacred to the faithful of three religions—Jews, Christians, and Muslims—and the political center of life for two peoples—Israelis and Palestinians. Jerusalem is a place where religion affects every aspect of life. There is almost no decision made in Jerusalem that does not relate, in ways large and small, to questions of religious commitment.

I am therefore grateful to organizations like the Niwano Foundation that take seriously the role of religion in the deepest questions of life. Nothing is more important for the peoples of Jerusalem or for the many communities of our shared planet than the quest for a just and lasting peace.

It is a great honor for me to be included among this great cloud of witnesses, as the 34th recipient of the Niwano Peace Prize. This list of former recipients includes people whom I have admired and from whom I have learned much. From its first recipient, Archbishop Helder Camara, to Pastor Esther Abimiku Ibanga, to General Secretary Philip Potter, to Bishop Gunnar Stålsett, to HRH Prince El Hassan bin Talal, the Niwano Peace Prize has communicated the significance and necessity of religious involvement in peacebuilding efforts.

I also treasure the opportunity to visit this beautiful country, and to be received so graciously by the Japanese people. Japan and her people have much to teach the world

about strength, resilience, and the power of spirituality to bring beauty and new life out of the ashes of war and great human suffering.

On this occasion, I wish to speak about the role of religion in public life, especially in the quest for building peace. To begin, I would like to reflect on the insights of another Niwano Peace Prize Laureate, Swiss Catholic priest and theologian, Prof. Hans Küng. As early as 1982, Küng articulated his conviction that there could be “no world peace without religious peace.” In the years that followed, he expanded that original thought to these lines:

No peace among the nations
Without peace among the religions.
No peace among the religions
Without dialogue between the religions.
No dialogue between the religions
Without investigation of the foundations of the religions.”¹

In his book on Islam, Küng was reacting specifically to the fragmenting worldview of Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations”² thesis. While Huntington sought to articulate the essence of other cultures different than his own western, Christian perspective, Küng advocating *listening* to persons from other faith traditions so we could better understand the foundations and motivations of their communities.

Religion continues to assert itself as a factor in politics. This reassertion has regional and global implications. And, as one famous American politician once said, “All politics is local.” In many communities throughout the world, religious conviction is making ever greater contributions to public debates.

In many circles, religion is viewed as having nothing but a negative role to play in local and world affairs. In recent years, we have seen many extremist groups extracting verses from their holy books, reading them out of any reasonable context, and generalizing them to justify the oppression of others. We have seen politicians try to capitalize on extremism either by *supporting* it through demagoguery and populism, or by *opposing* it through demagoguery and populism.

This alliance between political interests and religiously sanctioned extremism is a dangerous trend. It has been especially dangerous in the Middle East. Extremism is not tied to one religion alone; no single religion has a monopoly on extremism. In Jerusalem, we are challenged daily with extremism coming from Jewish settlers and

¹ Hans Küng, *Islam, Past, Present & Future* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), xxiii.

² The notion was first articulated by Bernard Lewis in “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” *Atlantic Monthly* (September 1990): 47–60. It was operationalized for policymaking in Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1993): 22–49.

the politicians rushing to support their efforts to seize land in the name of the Bible; we are challenged by Muslims who think the darkest interpretations of Islam are the only way to confront an opponent strong with worldly power; and we are challenged by Christian Zionists who come to our city to view it as an Armageddon playground where their visions of the End Times will one day unfold. I would warn that these voices are promoting an apocalyptic war, not only in Jerusalem, but in the whole world. All religions have extremists.

What we know, however, is that the core of religion is found in the dual call of love: to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” (*Matthew 22:37*) and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (*Matthew 22:39*) The world was reminded of this unifying message through the Common Word document issued in 2007, signed by 138 Islamic scholars from throughout the world. The document declared that the core message of the Holy Scriptures, including the Qur’an, is summed up in these two commandments: loving God, and loving the neighbor.

This loving, embracing message of religious commitment stands in stark contrast to what Charles Kimball has identified as the “five warning signs” present when religion becomes evil. Rather than loving God and loving the neighbor, religious faith taking the turn toward evil exhibits: 1) absolute truth claims, 2) blind obedience, 3) efforts to establish an ‘ideal’ time, 4) a sense that eschatological expectations justify any means, and 5) declarations of holy war. For Kimball, these five characteristics of harmful religious faith are challenged by the notion of “an inclusive faith rooted in a tradition.”³ Those extremists who claim to love God in fact hate their neighbor, and this is a corruption of the true religion. As it is written in 1 John chapter 4: “Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” (*1 John 4:20*) Unfortunately, there are many liars in our world.

Today, leaders within faith traditions must confront the extremists in their midst. We do this through a witness of robust moderation, rejecting that extremism is somehow the measure of faithfulness. Moderates are not wishy-washy. The moderate is not a person without identity. If we are going to challenge extremist theologies and the extremist politics they support, we must reclaim the center within our respective traditions. As a Lutheran Christian, my hope is anchored in the hope of God’s coming reconciliation of all things. This hope is present today, both for our neighbors and for our global ecology and environment. This hope does not separate us from our neighbors but calls us into ever greater concern for their wellbeing. From this foundation, we embrace rather than exclude, standing for common values of justice, peace, equality, living together, and accepting the other. As we Lutherans are commemorating 500 years of Reformation this year, a movement which carried the

³ These concepts are drawn from the chapter titles of Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil: Five Warning Signs* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

core message of liberation by God's grace, I think that we must today liberate religion from extremism and corruption.

It is a common misperception that many of the world's problems and conflicts have religious disagreements at their foundations. Although religious elements are present in many conflicts—including the Palestinian-Israeli conflict—one can often question if religion is the *cause* of a particular problem. Moreover, focusing on religious elements can often obscure the true sources of a particular conflict. This sort of analysis further diminishes the role of religion in global and local politics, making it seem far simpler than it actually is.

Religious leaders in complex situations know that religion has the ability to help or harm the present and future of the communities they seek to serve. While religious leaders must not become miniature politicians, they must become aware that they have a role to play in seeking peace with justice for their community, their country, and the world. To speak authentically, religious leaders must approach the problems of their societies through the basic elements of their respective faiths. In order to love God and love the neighbor, one must dig to the deep foundations of true religion.

Jerusalem has taught me the deep importance of interfaith dialogue. In Jerusalem, you not only see other faiths on a day-by-day basis, but you see the many facets within each of those faith communities. There are many ways to live out what it means to be within each of the broad categories of faith. As I have reflected on the many different faces I have seen in each of Jerusalem's religions, my sense is that this diversity is itself the antidote to extremism. Through my neighbors in Jerusalem, I have learned not only the importance of dialogue, but also the truth that dialogue will not succeed unless it is based on trust and friendship.

If you are not humbled in the face of these diverse faces within each tradition, your path will lead to exclusivity and extremism. First and foremost, religious extremists cannot accept diversity within their own community. As a result, they cannot accept diversity outside of their traditions; everyone else is an infidel, an unbeliever. What I have learned from this is that addressing extremism begins first within one's own tradition; this is a core responsibility of religious leaders today. Often, we find that some religious leaders are even complicit in tolerating extremism within their communities. But if we allow extremism in our own communities, then how can we confront it in others? For this reason, I ask religious leaders not be complicit, but to boldly confront the sick ideologies which pervert our religions.

The agenda for interreligious engagement today must focus on confronting extremisms within each particular tradition. Religious leaders must come together to compare efforts and share wisdom. While there is of course a role for secular and governmental leaders in combatting extremism, the most effective efforts to address these dynamics will come from within each particular community itself. If it is true that extremism is the antithesis of love, we must be motivated, first and foremost, by love.

In the Abrahamic traditions, we have a strong emphasis on speaking prophetically, challenging the standard ideas and practices of those in power. I strongly believe that the faithful practice of any religion has prophetic commitments. What we too often forget, however, is that the prophetic is not just directed toward others. Authentic prophetic critique and witness is directed first at my religion, my community. If we are self-critical, boldly addressing those elements in our faith communities that have become corrupted, our religion can become a source of life for our people and for others. When religion is promoting love, then it is truly prophetic.

This prophetic, loving message—a message that is the antithesis of extremism—is needed more than ever in my city of Jerusalem and in the whole world. While religious leaders alone cannot deliver a just and peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, peace cannot come without religious leaders. I invite religious leaders locally, regionally, and globally to promote education that accepts the otherness of the Other regardless of race, gender, or political affiliation. We badly need this education in our schools, in our homes, and in the media.

On an even more fundamental level, the Middle East—and indeed, the entire world—can benefit from the concept of equal citizenship with equal rights and equal responsibility that embraces diversity. Today, it is often accepted that some people can be equal but some are less equal. It is my conviction that we have equal citizenship because God created each of us equally and, according to my confession, Christ saves each of us equally. All human beings should live in dignity and the peace God intends for them in this world.

The work of interfaith dialogue is an art, and today, we need many artists. We need a multitude who will work in concert to become a symphony of love. Together, with God's help, we must compose a new world free of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, Christian-ophobia, xenophobia, and any other kind of hatred. We have the duty and the joy to sing the song of Creation, in which all have a voice, regardless of religion, gender, denomination, class, or tradition.

Finally, my friends, let me again express my extreme gratitude for bestowing upon me the Niwano Peace Prize. Receiving this prize does not graduate me from doing interfaith work. On the contrary, knowing that others have seen and heard my humble contribution, motivates me to work on interfaith issues of global importance until I no longer have breath.

I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude for my family, in particular for my wife Suad, who has been accompanying me on this journey of interfaith witness. I thank my church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, and the Lutheran World Federation, which has given me a platform in which to speak and work internationally.

Dear sisters and brothers, when we see the face of God in the Other, they may in turn see the face of God in us. Only then can we implement God's own purposes for peace, justice, and reconciliation in this world.

May God bless each of you.