

【The 17th Niwano Peace Prize Commemorative Speech】

Role of Religions for the 21st Century

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It is a supreme honor that the 17th Niwano Peace Prize is conferred upon me in this year 2000, the start of a new millennium and a new century. I would like to express my deepest appreciation to the members of the Niwano Peace Foundation and all the people concerned.

I would like to begin my address by explaining the reasons why I was filled with such gratitude and a renewed sense of purpose when the notification of the award reached me.

First, this Peace Prize has the name of the late Rev. Nikkyo Niwano, a man for whom I have always had the highest respect. Rev. Niwano was a devout and open-minded Buddhist who devoted his life to the cause of peace for all of humanity. He played leading roles in the establishment of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP) in 1970 and the Asian Conference on Religion and Peace (ACRP) in 1976, continuing to serve these two organizations for many years thereafter. As a Buddhist he also supported the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) in developing a new phase in its activities. Rev. Niwano pioneered new endeavors in religious cooperation for global peace and culture, and served as a role model for religious leaders around the world. I am a Christian but I have walked the path first created by Rev. Niwano, and have worked to fulfill the spirit of his endeavors in Korea, in Asia, and in the world. This great honor of being presented the Niwano Peace Prize thus has very special meaning for me.

Second, I find it significant that a prize established by a Japanese Buddhist should be awarded to a Korean Christian. Koreans who experienced the Japanese colonization of our country for 36 years have long been unable to overcome their resentment toward Japan. Like a towering ice cliff it leaves many Koreans feeling coldly distant from their neighbors and from the realization of peace with their neighbors in the depth of their mind.

I believe, however, that the start of the new millennium is the time to repair the rift between our peoples and to fulfill our shared responsibility in working together for peace in East Asia and the world. Reciprocal trust between Christians and Buddhists in Japan and South Korea is the key to our two nations collaborating for peace. The need for this kind of mutual understanding is greater than ever before. Christianity and Buddhism are highly influential in both countries. With the cooperation of people of other faiths we must promote greater trust between us and encourage our two countries to strive jointly for peace.

As I have said, my receiving this Peace Prize has special significance and meaning. I want to share the joy and honor of my receiving the prize with my

colleagues in Asia and in the world, who collaborate with me, especially with my fellow Koreans who have worked closely with me through the years.

As an individual I can have little effect. It is only because of the close collaboration of so many others that I have been able to achieve what I have. It is with renewed resolve that I will now apply myself to promoting closer cooperation between our two countries with the goal of global peace, and especially for peace in East Asia. I believe that is the best way to reciprocate the honor of the Niwano Peace Prize.

Now I would like to start my presentation.

In the past, peace has been a vital objective for the human race as a whole, as well as the essential common ground of all the world's religions. In the 21st century, peace will continue to be the foremost issue for humankind. Thus, it is imperative that cooperation among all religions, as well as a better common understanding of peace itself, be used as tools in an active approach to the pursuit of peace.

The Greek word for peace, "eirene", is passive in nature, merely referring to a state devoid of conflict. On the other hand, the Hebrew word for peace, "shalom", is a more proactive, creative and holistic term. "Shalom" means "peace on earth", and so transcends both inner peace and heavenly peace. "Shalom" means recovering the relations between God and man and nature, as well as man and man. Thus, our efforts toward peace aim not only at the prevention and cessation of war, but include moving toward the resolution of such prominent issues as racial and sexual discrimination, the inequitable distribution of wealth, and the mass destruction of the environment.

In the past, numerous religious wars have been waged, especially between Islam, Judaism and Christianity; and even as we begin the 21st century, many religious conflicts continue to claim precious lives and dominate cultures throughout the world. In light of the tragic and horrible history of religious conflict in the past, it is quite likely that civilizations will continue to clash in the future. Now is the time to reflect upon what we can do to transform our history of conflict and war into a future of peaceful coexistence, and to question what role the world's religions will play in this process. I believe that 'closed religions' will need to transform into 'open religions,' in order to promote peace, rather than impede it. In the 21st century, the self-righteous sectors of 'closed religions' will most likely accelerate the clash of civilizations. However, hope exists for 'open religions' to become a driving force in overcoming such tragic collisions, thus leading us into "an era of universal spirituality." Keeping this outlook on the 21st century in mind, I would like to present some measures toward achieving peace through dialogue and cooperation.

My first suggestion concerns building peace in Northeast Asia. During the 20th century, Northeast Asia suffered from serious conflicts. The Pacific War, Sino-Japanese War, internal conflicts in China, Korean War, Sino-Russian border conflicts and Vietnam War, as well as the struggle between Japanese imperialism and its colonies, have all fostered and deepened feelings of mutual hostility and distrust throughout the region. Thus, the question is: how can we bury these sad remnants of history in the past

and lay a new foundation for a future of trust and coexistence?

In the 21st century, peace between China, as a newly emerging continental power, and Japan and the United States, as leading naval powers, is vital. Moreover, the Korean peninsula, geographically situated in the middle of these two blocs will become a significant variable in the peace equation. The Korean peninsula can act as either a catalyst for confrontation or a bridge for peace in the region. Thus, I would like to make a special request to the religious leaders of Japan and China for their help, so that through peaceful reunification, the Cold War may cease to exist on the Korean peninsula. Religious leaders and civilians must join together in these outreach efforts, while the Korean and Japanese governments must collaborate on economic and political issues. Working in tandem, these efforts will open the path toward the reunification of North and South Korea. Achieving this goal will require nothing less than recovering our mutual trust, transforming our asymmetric power relations to symmetric ones and melting the walls of ice through the realization of humane love. With a peacefully reunified Korean peninsula serving as a bridge, peace in Northeast Asia is a tangible goal.

I strongly believe in the power of religion to play an integral role in reshaping Northeast Asia. Historically, Northeast Asia has been a wonderful crossroad for the meeting and mixing of diverse religions. It is there that Buddhism, originating from India, and Christianity, originating from the Mediterranean, came together with our own indigenous religions---Confucianism, Taoism and Shamanism. Undoubtedly, the synergistic interactions and creative combination of these diverse religions will contribute favorably to the formation of a new culture in the progressing era of religious pluralism.

My second suggestion concerns what I refer to as 'anti-life' issues. In 1993, at the Chicago Convention of the Parliament of World Religions, it was predicted that the global ecological system would be completely destroyed before the year 2093. In light of such concerns, the Parliament unanimously adopted Dr. Hans Kung's proposal for "Global Ethics." I have long suggested that environmental and ecological problems are critical issues to 'life.' Traditionally, the term "environment" reflects a Western view that places man at the center of universal discourse, and relegates nature to the periphery as a mere auxiliary for human existence. I believe that such an anthropocentric attitude of viewing nature only in relation to its human utility is the root cause of mass ecological destruction. Therefore, I would like to suggest that what is needed is a radical paradigm shift from "Anthropo-centrism" to "Bio-centrism."

Allow me to explain what I mean by 'anti-life' issues, in comparison to 'life' issues. The central issue of 'life' is the awareness that nature and human beings are mutually interdependent and complementary to one another. In other words, the relationships between the two are so intricately entwined that the survival of one depends upon the other. Today, we are facing the global proliferation of 'anti-life threats,' such as nuclear and chemical weapons, at an alarmingly rapid rate. Such mass proliferation of lethal weapons threatens the very existence of humankind, and not a single person is safe from the looming possibility of mass destruction. A single country

cannot solve such anti-life threats, but they demand instead the cooperation of the entire global community. We, therefore, need to think and act beyond our own national boundaries, regional territories and religious differences. Given the interdependency of the world's environmental problems, a particularly relevant saying comes to mind: we need to act locally and think globally.

My third suggestion regards spirituality in the information age. The "information revolution" has brought, and still continues to bring, profound and vast changes in every aspect of our lives. I believe that the immense transformations effected about two hundred and fifty years ago by the industrial revolution, following on the heels of the Renaissance Age and Lutheran reformation, will pale in comparison to the radical socio-cultural shifts that continue to be born in the current Information Age. In the midst of these profound changes, I would like to comment and elaborate on some specific issues affecting religious believers and people of faith, such as us.

By far, the most important and highly visible change that we are witnessing is the vanishing of hierarchical power relationships in all aspects of socio-politics, economics and culture. More fluid and organic forms of civic power, such as NGOs are replacing rigid hierarchies. In the same vein, we are witnessing the emergence of virtual "internet churches" and "internet temples" constructed and built by netizens. Propelled by the rapid dissemination of information, many netizens are set adrift in the cyber world. As people's spirituality loses depth in the absence of face-to-face interactions, and boundaries between reality and virtual reality are blurred, it will not be long before resulting externalities, such as identity crises, social isolation and cultural and moral dissociation, will pose serious religious, as well as secular, problems.

How shall we respond to these profound social changes? I would like to turn to Paul Tillich, who suggests that rather than living according to "heteronomy," the denial of reality, or "autonomy," rule by complacency, our days should be lived with respect to "theonomy," the rule of God. Through theonomy, we acknowledge our reality, while simultaneously working to transform its negative forces. Likewise, through religion, people during times of rapid change can have much-needed access to spirituality. Whether it is the Christian Holy Spirit or the Buddhist Spirit, spirituality helps humans to transcend daily hardships and challenges, and instead face their existential essence. Therefore, in the cyber age, the fostering of spirituality will be a religious function of utmost importance.

If the 20th century was an era of homogeneity, the upcoming 21st century will be one of diversity and plurality. Plurality helps us to internalize and integrate differences into our personal identities. The spirituality of the new century requires the courage to accept the spiritual experiences of other religions, and enrich our religious identity with these experiences. The resulting synergy of our honest interactions with others, and the genuine love that is borne from such encounters, cannot help but to create a rich and profound culture of religious renovation and spirituality.

My fourth suggestion concerns overcoming gross inequalities in the distribution of wealth. Computers have been replacing manual laborers with grave consequences for unemployment. A resulting collapse of the middle class would further

aggravate the gap between the poor and the rich. The unequal distribution of wealth is a serious domestic issue for almost every nation in the world. Without properly addressing this social problem, we will be far from achieving peace.

The concerns and suggestions that I have thus put forth are merely the tip of the proverbial iceberg. As our world becomes increasingly complex and multi-faceted, so do the problems that affect our lives, such as human rights violations, discrimination against the handicapped and increasing juvenile delinquency. In these modern times, religious leaders must be prepared to deal with profound issues of technological import, such as genetic engineering. Peering further into the future, the phenomenal technological advancements of the 21st century will lead mankind from the global age to the space age. With the advancements made in astrophysics, our global age is already progressing into the cosmic age. Thus, maintaining peace in the cosmos will become increasingly important, while religious spirituality will play a crucial role in opening and developing the age of cosmic spirituality.

Though I have made some suggestions and touched upon concerns, what is most important is to listen attentively to the needs of the 21st century, as it develops and progresses. In order for us to prepare for a new era, we must preserve the foundation of religious trusts, while thoroughly addressing the changes of reality. We must acknowledge the radical paradigm shift that is taking place, and in turn, we must grasp the truth behind the text of our religions within the context of the rapidly changing world around us. I would like to conclude by asking for your valuable participation in this worthy and weighty endeavor.

Thank you very much for your time and patience.