

Dr. Gunnar Stålsett, Bishop emeritus of Oslo, Church of Norway
Commemorative address on the occasion of the 30-ieth Niwano Peace Prize
ceremony in Tokyo, May 15 2013.

Honorable President Niwano

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let a new age of tolerance dawn!

It is a great honor for me to have been found worthy of the prestigious Niwano Peace Prize. I am deeply moved by the decision to make me the thirtieth recipient, joining a global company of laureates.

On this occasion I wish to pay tribute to the memory of the Founder Nikkyo Niwano for his understanding and promotion of the interrelatedness of peace and religion. I also wish to express my admiration for the abiding commitment to this legacy by The President of Rissho-Kosei-Kai Nichiko Niwano and Chairman Kinchiro Niwano of the Niwano Peace Foundation and to the Peace Prize Committee under the able leadership of Dr. Katherine Marshall.

I express my appreciation to the World Conference of Religions for Peace which I have had the privilege to serve for many years together with its affiliate The European Council of Religious Leaders.

I also offer my gratitude to the International Religious Liberty Association which for more than hundred years has been in the vanguard of the struggle for freedom of religion and which has helped me to see how dialogue and freedom of religion are twin sisters.

On this auspicious day I share my joy with friends and coworkers on all continents in the global movement of Religions for Peace. It is a special joy for me to have so many members of my family present here in Japan at this award ceremony. Without their strong support my mission would have been impossible.

This ceremony of the Niwano Peace Prize offers us a moment to reflect on the intimate connection - for better or worse - of religion and peace. The annual award is a constant reminder of the need critically to face the complexities of human conditions that lead to oppression and armed conflicts. But above all, the award ceremony offers a platform for the spiritual and political imperative of “war no more”.

Since the first Niwano Peace Prize was given to the Catholic Archbishop of Recife Brazil, Don Helder Camara, thirty years ago, the list of laureates has reflected a broad and inclusive understanding of peace - peace not only as a negative concept, meaning absence of war, but as a positive concept, embracing all that which serves to promote human wellbeing. Importantly, Niwano laureates have come from almost all major religious traditions, such as Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Christian, They have witnessed to a broad consensus among religions about what promotes the human well being so well expressed in the Hebrew concept of “shalom”. Indeed among the many peace prizes on the world stage, the uniqueness of the Niwano legacy is its recognition of the essential linkage of body and soul, spirituality and politics, religion and peace,

No country or culture is exempt from the duty to scrutinize their own status when it comes to fundamental freedoms. In my country, Norway, we are in the process of revising our 200 year old Constitution in order i.a. to give greater prominence to the international legal instruments on human rights. As the multicultural and multi religious reality of globalization also has impacted our small and hitherto homogenous country, the government has commissioned a report on new and inclusive politics of religion for the 21st century.

In my own ecumenical, interreligious and political engagement for peace, justice and reconciliation, I have come to appreciate the centrality of tolerance in all peace building efforts. I therefore wish to make *tolerance* the focus of my remarks today.

I am convinced that the practice of tolerance has become even more critical today in an age when religion and sectarian strife continues to cause war, when the holy is increasingly associated not with love, but with hatred. Ethnic and tribal feuds, racial and religiously motivated violence are causing deep distress in many parts of the world. Media reminds us daily that sectarian strife *within* a religion is causing more death and destruction than conflicts between religions. In some regions, such as Pakistan, Iraq and

Afghanistan, sectarian tensions between Shia and Sunni Muslims are at a boiling point, causing death and destruction on a daily basis. The repercussions are felt in many countries around the world. Attempts to contain the spread of fanaticism often bring new fuel to the fire.

I see a negative trend around the world when it comes to tolerance and freedom of religion. This is well documented both on the level of legislation and administration and in increasing incidents of religiously motivated social hostilities.

In many countries processes towards democracy are coupled with attacks on minorities, as witnessed in the signs of ethnic cleansing of the Rohingyas in Myanmar. The uprising in North African and Middle East countries and the civil war in Syria have such dimensions. There is indeed a strong tide against tolerance and respect of human dignity on all continents.

Counter strategies against extremism, against jihadist- and crusade mentality, under whatever name, are fraught with paradoxes. In the attempt of curbing terrorism world wide, fundamental principles of human rights are often violated. Thus narrowly defined “national security” has caused greater insecurity. The face less warfare of drones, about to proliferate to ever new regions, saves life of soldiers at the cost of lives of innocent civilians. This new dimension of technological arms race opens a new chapter in the important discourse on “just war”.

It is in this context that I see the need for our generation to revisit the meaning of tolerance in the 21st century. To which extent is tolerance appreciated, affirmed and practiced? Today’s struggle for a culture of peace and a civilization of universal brotherhood is addressing the prevailing conflict between tolerance and intolerance, between knowledge and ignorance.

In our attempt to rekindle the spirit of tolerance and mutual respect we may learn from history and be enlightened by the wisdom of important consensus documents of international law.

Two world wars shaped the fate of humanity in the last century. After WW II there was a universal drive for peace resulting in an epic effort to establish a common structure to avert the tragedy to repeat itself in the future. The birth of the United Nations is the most ambitious political achievement in human history. Its ambition is: *To save future generations from war! To promote freedom and tolerance, built on a shared*

understanding of human dignity. These ideals expressed the deep longings and aspirations of a war ridden human race.

The true nature of tolerance, its full implication, is perhaps best understood by its opposites; the ugly faces of intolerance, prejudice, discrimination, marginalization and deprivation which shape the daily life of hundreds of millions even today. The victims are the stigmatized others; discriminated because of gender, poverty, race, faith, color, sexual orientation, physical or mental status, cast or culture.

It is sad to realize to which extent our generation has forgotten the lessons of the past when it comes to the fundamental link between human dignity, peace, justice and tolerance.

We therefore need to return to the wisdom and the values that inspired the Magna Charta of the 20-ieth century, The UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human rights.

This is my deep conviction; at a time when tolerance and its corresponding concept, dialogue, are neglected or even scorned by many, we need to reaffirm the insights expressed in our human rights canons. These bear out that tolerance is at the heart and center of all other fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, and freedom of assembly, in short essential and existential respect for the other.

When the UN Charter and its corollary the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, both proclaim tolerance as a prerequisite for peace and as the essence of social harmony, they are not promoting “western values”. These are universal values; they are shared human values, deeply rooted in the inherent and shared wisdom of faith and cultures.

But history shows that they are also, in all parts of the world, equally contested out of ignorance and political expediency. Repeated attempts at the UN Human Rights Council to subordinate human rights to traditional values reflect a prevailing uneasiness both in politics and religion about the preeminence of tolerance.

Today we must learn from the bold affirmations of those who brought the world from war to peace in 1945. Addressing the needs of a tormented humanity, political leaders bonded together never to tolerate that humans should have to endure such suffering and oppression.

The message of the UN Charter expressed in simple words, a profound commitment: *“We, the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, and for these ends to practice tolerance and, live together in peace with one another as good neighbors”*

It is worth observing today that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights lifts up the importance of education for *“understanding, tolerance and friendship among nations, racial or religious groups”*

These two epic statements in the history of human endeavors for tolerance and peace are the basis for a wide range of rights based international treaties advocating non-discrimination and mutual respect.

One such pillar is the UNESCO Declaration of Principles of Tolerance, proclaimed and signed on November 16, 1995.

Its message calls us *(To)... take all positive measures necessary to promote tolerance in our societies, because tolerance is not only a cherished principle, but also a necessity for peace and for the economic and social advancement of all peoples.*

Interlinking tolerance with peace and development, this declaration speaks to our age when many see tolerance as an impotent concept, void of political relevance. Tolerance and respect are expressed as two sides of the same coin. It is inspiring to read the affirmation of the richness of a multi cultural world, and of the many ways in being human. It is challenging to sense the tone of moral duty and political imperative. I feel strongly that the clarity with which this declaration states what tolerance is and what is not, is critically needed today.

So what is tolerance in the words of these noble texts? *“Tolerance is respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world’s cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human... Tolerance is harmony in difference. It is not only a moral duty; it is also a political and legal requirement. Tolerance, the virtue that makes peace possible, contributes to the replacement of the culture of war by a culture of peace...Tolerance is, above all, an active attitude prompted by recognition of universal rights and fundamental freedoms of others.... Tolerance is the responsibility that upholds human rights, pluralism (including cultural pluralism), democracy and the rule of law”.*

To those who tend to equate tolerance with lack of conviction, with indifference and with negligence of values, there are insights about what tolerance is not: *“Tolerance is not concession, condescension or indulgence. The practice of tolerance does not mean toleration of social injustice or the abandonment or weakening of one’s own convictions.”*

Now, how do these affirmations challenge religious positions?

I believe that we honestly need to ask if in fact religion, as we claim, influences secular laws and regulations in the directions of greater fulfillment of human rights and defense of human dignity. Must we not with shame admit that often it is the other way round; that religion must learn from secular society and listen to humanistic world views in order to fully understand and practice tolerance? Must not religion be taught human rights and the value of humanism? Do we not religion need the challenge of secularism to shed bigotry?

These are not theoretical questions; they are life and death issues, frequently demonstrated in outrageous violence against women. Many are the martyrs of tolerance and many are the victims of intolerance at the hand of people who claim to honor God with their bombs. There is no greater blasphemy!

The fight of the brave Pakistani girl Malala Yousufai for education for girls almost cost her, her life at the hands of religious extremists. Long is the list of brave men and women who have been assassinated because they championed freedom of thought, freedom of religion and freedom of assembly. Let there be no doubt, a terrorist” holy war” is a war *against* tolerance. The victims are children, women, the poor and the uneducated, ordinary people, over and over again marginalized and oppressed.

There is no greater challenge today for formal and non-formal education, especially for religious education, than to contribute to the formation of the mind set of children at the deepest level of consciousness and conscience in the spirit of tolerance. There should indeed in the words of the Holy Koran be “no compulsion in religion” Religion should not be used for the crushing of a child’s dream for a better future

Inspired by tolerance as a global value and as a prerequisite for world peace, the European Council of Religions for Peace (ECRL), which I have had the privilege to serve for many years, has in a number of statements addressed aspects of interaction between religion and society. We have seen the need to promote dialogue and common praxis as

the exercise of tolerance. In doing so we have found that there indeed is a two way street between dialogue and tolerance: Tolerance leads to dialogue. Dialogue is critical for promoting and upholding fundamental freedoms, including freedom of religion and freedom of expression. Dialogue makes democracy flourish.

Our ECRL Istanbul Declaration of 2010 addresses issues which are daily debated in most European countries, including Norway, such as the role and place of religion in an open society. As religious leaders from all major faiths we promised to:

... Work for the rights of all religions to be visible in the public square. In a tolerant society people have the right to promote their faith and to manifest it in public. This includes displaying religious symbols, wearing religious dress, symbols or articles of faith, establishing schools for education of new generations, and building places of worship which conform to each religious tradition...

These are poignant affirmations on a continent where hate speech in social media is the most prevalent expression of intolerance, and the most difficult to restrain. Its target is individuals who defend multiculturalism and the fundamental rights of minorities. Anti-Semitism finds ever new expressions, and hatred of Islam is on the rise. Christian tenets and beliefs are used to attack others and are at the same time under pressure from increasingly strident atheism.

I see many of the conflicts that today shape history and impact the life of future generations as a struggle for tolerance. I suggest that the so-called Arab Spring started as a desire for tolerance, respect and democracy. Its driving force is a protest against the authoritarian rule that for generations have stifled freedom and hindered prosperity and equality. The dream of those who ignited the fire for freedom was not for a new type of authoritarianism, now in a religious guise. They did not fight for a new Pharaoh to replace the autocratic rulers of the past.

The question posed by many today is if the darkness of intolerance can be overcome by the light of knowledge and faith. Will the struggle and prayers for an open, pluralistic, democratic, and truly tolerant society, shape a better world in this century? Will the spring bring forth a summer of dialogue and respect of universal human rights?

A final thought: Tolerance does not thrive with triumphalism, nor does dialogue flourish with dogmatism. Tolerance is sympathy of the heart, born in the souls of humans. Therefore tolerance is the language not of power but of humility.

This I find genuinely reflected in a Messianic promise in the words of Jesus:
Blessed are the meek. They will inherit the earth. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. I believe this is the spirit also of the Niwano legacy.

It is in this spirit I pray: Let a new age of tolerance dawn.