

The Role of Faith in World Peace

By Tony Blair

Adapted from Tony Blair's talk at the launch of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation at the Time Warner Center, New York City, on Friday, May 30, 2008. © 2008 The Tony Blair Faith Foundation. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission of The Tony Blair Faith Foundation.

Today we launch the first of a series of partnerships to put into effect the purpose of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation—to bring dialog among the six leading faiths: Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh and Jewish.

The world is undergoing tumultuous change. Globalisation, underpinned by technology, is driving much of it, breaking down boundaries, altering the composition of whole communities, even countries, and creating circumstances in which new challenges arise that can only be met effectively together. Interdependence is now the recognised human condition.

The characteristic of today's world is change. The consequence is a world opening up, becoming interdependent. We must make sense of this interdependence through peaceful co-existence and working together to resolve common challenges, requiring an emotional as well as an intellectual response consistent with the conclusion that we are members of a global community as well as individual nations. We must be global citizens as well as citizens of our own country.

All this sounds impossibly idealistic, but if the analysis of the nature of the world is as I believe, it is in fact the only practical way to organise our affairs. Idealism becomes the new realism. This is especially so since the world is changing in other ways

too—power and the centre of political interest are shifting east. The emergence of China and India has been obvious for years with practical impact on our lives.

Consider an institution like the G7, how different it and its membership would be if it were invented today. We must come to terms with the new reality, for the twentieth century is history. Into this new world comes the force of religious faith. I quote from recent Gallup polls, which indicate that most Christians want better relations between Christianity and Islam but believe most Muslims don't. Most Muslims want better relations but believe most Christians don't. Most Americans think most Muslims do not accept other religions. Actually most Muslims say they want greater and not lesser interaction between religions.

In answer to the question: "Is religion an important part of your life," many Muslim countries' citizens answer in the high eighties or nineties as a percentage; in the US it is around seventy percent; in the UK and mainland Europe it is under forty percent. Interestingly, though, even in the UK over a third of people say it is important.

Religion matters and there is a lot of fear among the faiths, but you cannot understand the modern world unless you understand the importance of religious faith. Faith motivates, galvanises, organises and integrates millions upon millions of people. Yet globalisation is pushing people together. Interdependence is reality. Peaceful co-existence is essential. If faith becomes a countervailing force, pulling people apart, it becomes destructive and dangerous. But if it becomes an instrument of peaceful co-existence, teaching people to live with difference, to treat diversity as a strength, to respect "the other," then faith becomes an important part of making the twenty-first century work. It enriches, it informs, it provides a common basis of values and belief for people to get along together.

Even if I had no faith, I would still believe in the central necessity of people of faith learning to live with each other in mutual respect and peace.

There are many excellent meetings, convocations, conferences and organisations that work in the inter-faith area. We do not want to replicate what they do. We do not want to engage in a doctrinal inquiry, or to subsume different faiths in one faith of the lowest

common denominator. We want to show faith in action, produce greater understanding among faiths, for people of one faith to be comfortable with those of another because they know what they truly believe, not what they thought they might believe.

The Foundation has four specific goals. First, the Foundation aims to educate. We begin today with the association with Yale University's School of Divinity and School of Management, which will help design a new three-year course called "Faith and Globalisation." I will lead a series of seminars each fall, starting in September 2008. The idea is to create a course which can become an enduring part of Yale's teaching, can be spun off to other universities in different parts of the globe, and can stimulate original research and be a resource for those working in this field.

Secondly, we are announcing the first of our partnerships to mobilise those of faith in pursuit of the UN's Millennium Development Goals. We call on the four billion people of faith in the world to help do more to end the scourge of malaria that has killed so many millions and will kill many more unless eradicated. We are joining with the Malaria No More Campaign, a wonderful organisation whose mission is to end death through malaria in the next five to ten years. The solution lies in distributing bed nets and medicines. The resources are becoming available. But the need to get the bed nets and medicines to the people and see them properly used is where the faiths, who are present in each of the affected communities, can help. Our purpose will be to help mobilise the different faiths in pursuit of this goal.

Thirdly, we believe that inter-faith interaction can benefit from a physical structure to which people can come, to learn, to discuss and to contemplate. We have agreed to partner the proposal initiated by the Co-Exist Foundation to establish Abraham House in London. Though expressly about the Abrahamic faiths, it will be open to those from the wider faith community. It will be a standing exhibition, library and convention centre for the inter-faith world. The extraordinary success of the "Sacred Texts" exhibition at the British Library last year shows the potential for such an initiative.

Finally, we will help organisations whose object is to counter extremism and promote reconciliation in matters of religious

faith. Though there is much focus, understandably, on extremism associated with the perversion of the proper faith of Islam, there are elements of extremism in every major faith. It is important where people of good faith combat such extremism, that they are supported.

This is a century rich in potential to solve problems, to provide prosperity to all, to overcome longstanding issues of injustice that previously we could not surmount. But it only works if the values which inform the change are values that unify and do not divide. Religious faith has a profound role to play.

The Right Honorable Charles Lynton “Tony” Blair was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1997 to 2007, the longest-serving Labour Prime Minister. A graduate of St. John’s College at Oxford University, he is trained as a lawyer, and upon stepping down as Prime Minister was appointed Middle East envoy to the United Nations, the European Union, the United States and Russia.