

7 ways to advance religious harmony in China and around the world

By Tony Blair

As globalization pushes the world closer together, the issue in respect of religious faith is very simple and clear: does it become a civilizing force that shapes globalization to advance human good; or does it become a countervailing force, dividing and alienating societies from each other?

We know religion has the power to do good. We know religion also has the power to inspire acts of terrorism and evil.

We know something else. Religious affiliation in our world today is growing.

China is a fascinating story. There are more Muslims than the whole of Europe. There are more practicing Protestants than in Britain. More practicing Catholics than in Italy. And an estimated 100 million or more people who consider themselves Buddhists.

China has sixty different ethnic groups. Its religious diversity is obvious. So how China charts its path to a harmonious society will not only matter to the world, but will be something from which we can study and learn. Likewise, how in different parts of the world, religious faith impacts stability and harmony, will be a vital Chinese interest.

There is another aspect to this global picture which is crucial. Because the world is shrinking through the impact of mass media, modern communication and travel, today's young people will mix and mingle with different races, colors, nationalities and creeds.

My belief is that, in this new world, we cannot afford or sanction what I would call 'religious illiteracy.' No one today, aspiring to lead a country, company or civic organization should be without a developed understanding of religion and its role in our different societies.

That's why I'm delighted that the Beijing Forum should have as its theme 'The Harmony of Civilizations' and as part of its discussion, 'Faith and Responsibilities: Spiritual Reflections on Global Issues.' This is an immensely timely discussion. It heralds, as well, yet another dimension in the way China is opening up to the world, engaging in the issues that matter, and providing leadership. And it enables me to mark my foundation's partnership with Peking University.

In my experience you don't understand a country just by measuring its output. You understand it best when you understand its culture and, most of all, its people. China's willingness to engage in this issue will greatly assist East-West relations.

So how do we ensure religion and faith play their proper part as a force for good?

I suggest seven ways in which we can bring about the greater harmony between and within civilizations we seek:

First, we need to recognize and encourage religious faith to express its essential, and in my view more true role, as a source of values, not ideology. It is a means through caring and compassion of creating better functioning, more harmonious societies. This is faith as values, as the denial of self in the wider interests of others.

Second, we need to discourage faith where it is defined as a badge of identity in opposition to others. I am a Christian and identify myself as such, I do not and should not disrespect those of a different faith who have taken a different path to salvation.

Third, we should study and learn from our own classics and traditions. Faith is not static. It has evolved. Each of our societies can draw on a rich vein of intellectual, social and philosophical discourse to explain our past and guide our future.

Fourth, I would argue that in this era of globalization, the need for a sense of values, of principles, is more urgent than ever. Faith, of course, is not the only source of such values. But faith can provide a certain equilibrium, reminding us of our responsibilities as well as our rights; our duties as well as our self-interest. It reminds us to ask this fundamental question: what is life for?

Fifth, it is therefore right that faith takes its proper place within the debates that interest and exercise our people and our societies. Religious leaders should not try to dictate; but they should have the ability to speak, and to offer their view.

Sixth, to ensure harmony between civilizations, those of faith must respect the fact that in most nations today there will be more than one religious tradition, and that one faith should not try to exercise control or claim greater privilege of citizenship over another.

Seventh, we have the best chance of obtaining the above, if we encourage, promote and activate interfaith harmony and understanding. This is of the essence. So we should create not just the feelings but the practical methods of co-operation that lead to co-existence.

The Tony Blair Faith Foundation now operates in many different countries in the world. We have distinct strands to our work. One is academic - hence our recent partnership with Peking University. We now have seven universities in our program. Our ambition is to create an academic discipline, with research and publications around the concept of faith and globalization.

Then we have a schools program. This program connects high school students of different faiths and cultures in fifteen countries across the world using internet technology and pedagogical material. As students testify, the results are extraordinary in breaking down barriers.

Then we have an action program that brings faiths together to contribute to meeting the UN Millennium Development Goals with a focus on malaria.

To have China as a partner in this program of interfaith study, is an honour and opportunity. It allows us to prove that to know the world today we need to know the place of religion within it; that it can also, properly expressed, be a source of values we require to civilize globalization.

This world should not only be more prosperous materially, but in spirit also.

*This is an edited version of a speech made by Tony Blair at the Beijing Forum, China on 7th November 2010. Tony Blair is Founder and Patron of the **Tony Blair Faith Foundation**.*