

Aligning for Interfaith Dialogue

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During the first quarter of this year on March 16-18, senior officials from the 118 member countries of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) met in Manila. In this special ministerial meeting at the Philippine International Convention Center, the heads of delegations declared their understanding and support for the extraordinary theme chosen for their conference: "Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace and Development."

The theme was extraordinary because the Non-Aligned Movement was originally a political grouping of nations organized more than half a century ago that did not want to align themselves with either the Communist Bloc or the Free World, political aggregations that divided the world at that time during the era of the Cold War.

But now, the NAM countries were all aligning themselves behind the call for interfaith dialogue – an implicit admission that the fault lines threatening the world's unity today may no longer run across ideological lines, but rather more profoundly across religious lines.

Manila Declaration

Thus, the Manila Declaration adopted by the NAM delegates stressed the need for "dialogue among cultures, civilizations and religions" in direct opposition to the "clash of civilizations" theory propounded by some political observers at the coming of the third millennium. Along with this call for dialogue was the reaffirmation of common fundamental values contained in the United Nations' Millennium Declaration: "freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and shared responsibility."

Coming mostly from the Asian, African, and Latin American continents, the NAM delegates affirmed religious freedom and the protection of all human rights that are "universal, indivisible,

interdependent and interrelated." They expressed their commitment to promote "a culture of peace and dialogue," seen not as an option but as an imperative in today's world.

In particular, initiatives already taken along these lines were recognized coming from several NAM member countries such as Bahrain, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, the Philippines, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, and the Sudan.

Speaking for the Philippines in her keynote address, President Gloria M. Arroyo cited the example of the Bishops-Ulama Conference which over the past 14 years has brought together Christian bishops and Muslim ulama in dialogue and a common search for peace in Mindanao. Together with Pakistan, the Philippines has also pursued the promotion of interfaith and intercultural dialogue at the United Nations General Assembly since 2004.

Voices of NAM member states

Described by President Tito of the former Yugoslavia as the "conscience of mankind" at its inception, NAM has indeed evolved into a continuing forum for world peace. It is instructive then to listen to some of the representative voices at the NAM conference:

- "We should champion tolerance rather than discrimination, communication rather than rejection, and co-existence rather than confrontation." (China)
- "All religions are rooted in common ground and share a diversified world. They all call for freedom, human dignity, equality, tolerance, harmony and acceptance of others." (Qatar)
- "All the great religions of the world essentially represent what the Vedas postulate: The Truth is One, the wise call it by many names.... Mahatma Gandhi once said, 'Intolerance is itself a form of violence and an obstacle to the growth of a true democratic spirit.'" (India)
- "Dialogue among civilizations and cultures, but most importantly religions, is an effective remedy to prevent conflicts.... Even in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, faith communities should be seen as vital partners." (Suriname)
- "Mainstreaming of interfaith principles into education systems – religious and secular, formal and informal – is central to sustained generational change." (Tanzania)
- "Promotion of understanding among cultures and faiths is a political and moral imperative in our globalized world.... We must be ready to move beyond dialogue and translate this goodwill into concrete actions to create peaceful, tolerant and harmonious societies." (Pakistan)
- "All great religions advocate love; all great religions hold life to be

sacred; all great religions profess peace and promote understanding.” (Philippines)

Civil Society and Faith-Based Organizations

A day before the opening of the Special NAM Conference, religious leaders and representatives of Faith-Based Organizations converged to underscore a complementary theme: “Strengthening partnerships with governments on interfaith dialogue and cooperation.”

Their joint statement noted the continuing situation in some countries of religious sectarianism and discrimination, persecution of minority groups and acts of terrorism in the name of religion. “There is no peace without development, and no development can come without peace,” noted the representatives of Civil Society, “but neither can be achieved without interfaith dialogue.”

In particular, the participants pointed out that:

- Religious minorities can become active partners in peace building with government assistance;
- Intra-faith dialogue according to one’s religious traditions should be a prerequisite step to inter-faith dialogue; and
- What is needed is a deeper appreciation for the spiritual bases for peace in all our religious traditions.

I was privileged to be a co-convenor of the first day’s discussions among faith-based organizations. At the NAM conference itself, I attended as representative of the Holy See which has an observer status in this international body.

It is in this light that I fully agree with Dr. William Vendley, Secretary General of the World Conference of Religions for Peace, who summarized three courses of action for NAM member countries in the coming years:

1. Religious communities themselves can come together through interfaith dialogue and multi-religious cooperation for peace;
2. Governments should enter into principled partnership with religious bodies in the service of the common good; and
3. Personal morality and common values found in all religions need to be translated into a new political paradigm. Such is the concept of “shared security” where the security of one country depends on the security of other countries.