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Draft Proposal For the Creation of United Nations Centers for Nonviolent Conflict Prevention

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Indifference to the suffering of others is the cause of social injustice. Compassion is its remedy. Wisdom in practice helps create enabling institutions that promote compassionate qualities and behaviors. Global institutions based on this principle are needed.

The Problem

The greatest threat that faces humanity can be understood as the indifference toward extraordinary human suffering from poverty, environmental practices that ignore our responsibility to future generations, and the willingness to threaten the use of nuclear weapons. This indifference is compounded by notions of religious, ethnic and nationalistic exclusivity, which prevent communication and understanding, and breed still greater insecurity. The ultimate consequences of these attitudes and actions are political apathy toward critical issues and a reversion toward violence, provincialism and prejudice.

The Opportunity

This indifference must be overcome by an awakening of our capacity to learn to live together as one human family. One crucial step will be the promotion of interfaith and intercultural understanding through the institutionalization of forums for dialogue. Scriptures of the major religions are replete with explicitly acceptable violence as well as admonitions upon which to base universal love, justice and appreciation. We must find ways of institutionalizing the loving dimensions so that "loving ones neighbor as oneself" can become the norm.

Preventive diplomacy aims to prevent disputes from arising between parties, stop current disputes from escalating into violence, and limit the spread of conflict. Governments alone cannot accomplish this. Religious institutions, academic institutions, non-governmental organizations, businesses and professional communities therefore need not only to see the value of greater levels of intercultural and interfaith understanding, but also to participate and feel a sense of responsibility to help accomplish the goal of peaceful coexistence.

Two Practical Proposals

1. Establish UN Centers for Nonviolent Conflict Prevention at Universities around the World

There is a critical need to promote interfaith understanding through interfaith dialogue. The United Nations is in a unique position to help create structures where the faith-based traditions can be utilized in the pursuit of preventive diplomacy. Universities worldwide would be equipped with UN Centers for Nonviolent Conflict Prevention, to promote intercultural and interfaith dialogue and experiences. The cost would be low, and the prestige and value high for the participating institution. Such centers would educate people who are both committed to interfaith and intercultural understanding, and who can help build a global norm based on tolerance and pluralism. They would increase the prestige of participating universities by enhancing the services offered to their students, communities and nations, and they would strengthen participants' understanding of the global challenges the UN addresses by educating students and the general public about the UN's mission and programs.

2. Establish a UN Center for Nonviolent Conflict Prevention and Resolution at UN Headquarters

A Center for Nonviolent Conflict Prevention and Resolution (CNCPR) as part of the UN headquarters could utilize all available means of mediation, negotiation, conciliation, and nonviolent conflict prevention and resolution in addressing current and potential conflicts. Nearly every one of the over 1,000 religious leaders gathered at the UN for the Millennium Peace Summit expressed a willingness to help in such an endeavor. The UN CNCPR could serve as a place to utilize, through the creation of ongoing forums, the great religious traditions of the world as a resource for promoting transnational ethical values. Programs (such as regular retreat seminars focused on prayer and meditation in each of the world's major religions) could be offered to teach tolerance, cultural appreciation and harmony by creating. Forums could be created within the UN for authentic inter-religious dialogue and the experiential sharing of different methods of prayer, contemplation, and meditation, as well as shared moral and spiritual values. Finally,

religious communities could be utilized both as a world resource in service to the suffering, and to help coordinate resource distribution to that end.

The UN CNCPR will reinforce the regional offices at which ongoing multi-cultural, inter-religious, and inter-ethnic dialogue can take place as a method of preventive diplomacy. It could take full advantage of the world's religions and could, in this context, be utilized to preempt cycles of misunderstanding, fear and violence. The monetary costs of these Centers would be miniscule compared to the extraordinary wastefulness of military expenditures, which by their nature help reproduce cycles of poverty, fear and violence. Their spiritual dividends, however, could be immeasurable.

The Benefits

By finding ways of promoting openly the process of interfaith appreciation, the quiet study of our common humanity is stimulated. One of the greatest gifts received by the open hearted is the gratitude of being part of the human family, a sense of joy in its variety of expressions of awe, love, and the sacred. Those who have this sense of gratitude are the ones who can step forward to assert our common ground, the place where exclusivism and fanaticism cannot flourish. Where our common humanity is affirmed and love expressed, fear, the breeding ground for fanaticism, is overcome. Where our common humanity is affirmed, the precondition for justice is established. Justice is the foundation for peace.

9/11 has shown us that a fractured world where fanaticism is allowed to grow, where grievances find no peaceful means of redress, where people demonize innocents who do not believe as they do, could, if it grows, be catastrophic. Compassion leads to actions that give hope based on a sense of justice without regard to religion, race or national situation. In such an environment, visions based on hate, hopelessness and fear will be dried up.

Let us be warned and plant places where our higher nature is affirmed. We must come into the open space of our greater humanity and assert the highest ideals that the founders of every faith proclaimed: "Love thy neighbor as thyself."

Proposal Background

1. Establish UN Centers for Nonviolent Conflict Prevention at Universities around the World

There is a critical need to promote interfaith understanding through interfaith dialogue. The United Nations is in a unique position to help create structures where greater utilization of the faith-based traditions in the pursuit of preventive diplomacy could be achieved. So many are today inspired by key United Nations documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its premise that those rights we wish for ourselves shall be granted to others as well.

Imagine the great universities of the world equipped with UN Centers for Nonviolent Conflict Prevention where intercultural and interfaith dialogue and experiences could be promoted. The cost would be very low and the prestige and value high for the participating institution. Such centers could help create a critical mass of educated people who are committed to greater levels of interfaith and intercultural understanding and who are able to help ensure a global norm of tolerance and an appreciation for the value of pluralism.

Franchising businesses are successful by licensing a method of operation associated with the goodwill of a trade name. Franchisors guarantee consistent quality wherever their trade name is used. Franchisees gain the knowledge of the method of operation and the benefit of the goodwill associated with the trade name. The UN has methods of operations, which are associated with its high profile and valuable trade name. Universities could enhance their services to their students, communities and nations by utilizing a UN license to operate Centers for Nonviolent Conflict Prevention. The UN and the world would benefit from this increased outreach and the participating universities would benefit with heightened prestige and excellent useful programs.

Such Centers could serve to strengthen understanding of global challenges the UN addresses, such as the need for sustainable environmental practices, ending gross poverty and gender inequities, and the disarmament of weapons of mass destruction. These Centers could educate students and the general public about the mission and programs of the UN and thus help create a constituency that can see beyond mere national interests. Such persons are able to address the underlying problems that give rise to terrorism.

Preventive diplomacy aims to prevent disputes from arising between parties, stop current disputes from escalating into violence, and limit the spread of conflict. Governments alone cannot accomplish this. In fact, religious institutions, academic institutions, non-governmental organizations, businesses and professional communities all need to see the value of greater levels of intercultural and interfaith understanding. They need to participate and feel a sense of responsibility to help accomplish goals of peaceful coexistence.

2. Establish a UN Center for Nonviolent Conflict Prevention and Resolution at UN Headquarters

A Center for Nonviolent Conflict Prevention and Resolution as part of the UN headquarters could utilize all available means of mediation, negotiation, conciliation, and nonviolent conflict prevention and resolution in addressing current and potential conflicts. The Center would utilize fully the good will of many of the world's religious leaders.

Over 1,000 religious leaders gathered at the UN for the Millennium Peace Summit and nearly every one expressed a willingness to help in such an endeavor. The UN Center for Nonviolent Conflict Prevention and Resolution in New York could also serve as a place:

- a. To utilize the great religious traditions of the world as a resource for promoting transnational ethical values. Thus we recommend an ongoing forum where religious leaders can dialogically address the pressing need to establish common values and serve as a resource to advise the Secretariat and the Member States.

- b. To explore the promulgation of programs that teach tolerance, cultural appreciation and harmony at a profound level by creating forums for authentic inter-religious dialogue and the experiential sharing of the different methods of prayer, contemplation and meditation. We suggest the promotion in UNITAR and amongst UN personnel and the personnel of all national missions to the UN of retreat seminars focused on prayer and meditation in each of the world's major religions. The resulting shared understanding represents preventive diplomacy at the deepest level, for when there is authentic spiritual sharing, trust and confidence are easier to accomplish. Also, the UN community will begin to actually be a model of intercultural respect and tolerance to which the Member States can look for guidance.
- c. To provide experiential courses on each of the religions' prayer and meditation methods. Each of the world's religions utilizes prayer and contemplation to help achieve inner peace and harmony. Such experiences lead people to a greater ability to perform inspired public service. We thus encourage the use of such methods be made explicitly available to all in the UN community in the form of offerings of on-going regular events designed to enrich multi-religious, ethnic and cultural development and understanding and for the enrichment of the personnel such that greater inspiration in documents and programs might be forthcoming from the UN.
- d. To engage religious communities in service to the suffering. Charity, service and compassion are universally recognized values in all religions and areas of social development that can be more fully utilized by the UN. Religious communities, as a world resource, have been under-utilized in this regard, and could help in coordination of resource distribution.
- e. To create a true vocation of service at the heart of UN work, forums need to be created in which spiritual and moral shared values and experiences can be expressed by UN personnel to one another.

The UN Center for Nonviolent Conflict Prevention and Resolution will reinforce the regional offices at which on-going multi-cultural, interreligious, and inter-ethnic dialogue can take place as a method of preventive diplomacy. It could take full advantage of the world's religions and could, in this context, be utilized to preempt cycles of misunderstanding, fear and violence. The extraordinary waste of resources on armaments and the suffering caused by their uses simply cannot be overlooked when addressing poverty. As long as resources are disproportionately diverted to pursuing peace and stability through military means and fortunes expended on weapons ending poverty will remain beyond reach. The costs of these Centers would be miniscule compared to military expenditures.

By finding ways of promoting openly the process of interfaith appreciation, the quiet study of our common humanity is stimulated. One of the greatest gifts received by the open hearted is the gratitude of being part of the human family, a sense of joy in its variety of expressions of awe, love, and the sacred. Those who have this sense of gratitude are the ones who can step forward to assert our common ground, the place where exclusivism and fanaticism cannot flourish. Where our common humanity is affirmed and love expressed, fear, the breeding ground for fanaticism, is overcome. Where our common humanity is affirmed, the precondition for justice is established. Justice is the foundation for peace.

9/11 has shown us that a fractured world where fanaticism is allowed to grow, where grievances find no peaceful means of redress, where people demonize innocents who do not believe as they do, could, if it grows, be catastrophic. Clearly, where compassion leads to actions that give hope based on a sense of justice without regard to religion, race or national situation, the environment where visions based on hate, hopelessness and fear will be dried up. Let us be warned and plant places where our higher nature is affirmed.

Whether garbed in extremist political ideology, racial or tribal identity, or religious dogma, the exclusivist's vision diminishes our common capacity to work cooperatively, reason together, identify our common interests and establish rules and laws of governance. The successes of the modern world have demonstrated that Hobbes, who believed life to be short, brutish and nasty, was trumped by Locke and his philosophical stepson Jefferson, who viewed our fate with the faith that we are blessed with

inalienable rights, regardless of our religious beliefs, that no state can remove and that we are capable of establishing institutions to protect those rights. This optimistic view is the basis of the United States, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the UN System. It challenges all fanatics who deny civilized give and take. A first step to discover that all people possess such human capacities is through direct interfaith interaction.

We no longer have the luxury of living in religious ghettos. We must come into the open space of our greater humanity and assert the highest ideals that the founders of every faith proclaimed: "Love thy neighbor as thyself." Our humanity is revealed the deeper we realize and live this admonition.