ON THE ROLE OF INTERFAITH HARMONY IN THE
PEACEFUL RESOLUTION OF DISPUTES

By

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Thirteen years ago, some 2,000 religious and spiritual leaders gathered here in General Assembly Hall to attend the Millennium World Peace Summit. It concluded with a common declaration of their Commitment to Global Peace, which contained strong endorsements of the peaceful resolution of disputes and the pursuit of nuclear disarmament.¹

This of course was not the first time that such themes have appeared in the history of the United Nations. After all, disarmament, the duty to resolve disputes peacefully, and the prohibition on the threat and use of force are primary norms found in the Charter. Together with the UN’s collective security system, they continue to offer a universally agreed framework for the maintenance of international peace and security. It is gratifying that these values at the United Nations have been so broadly supported by the world’s religious and spiritual leaders.

Yet it is unfortunately true that armed conflicts—including some inflamed by religious convictions—are still underway in several parts of our troubled planet. The twin failures to resolve such conflicts peacefully and to achieve global nuclear disarmament testify to the need for new efforts to foster interfaith harmony—because it has much to contribute in achieving these goals.

Here at the United Nations, there has always been a certain tension between the collective ideals of this Organization and the individual behaviours of its Member States. Interfaith dialogue and cooperation can help in bringing these into closer alignment.

It is well documented that religious institutions have already contributed greatly to peace-building operations. They have played an indispensable role in the restoration of trust and confidence between people who are recovering from armed conflicts, as seen in the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration process.

They have also demonstrated their enthusiastic support for global nuclear disarmament—and I would like to note here that the word “enthusiasm” derives from its root meaning, “having divine inspiration”. Deep concerns over the security and welfare of ordinary civilians are motivating new initiatives worldwide to address the implications for nuclear weapons of international humanitarian law. Here, law and religion are converging.

The world’s religions clearly have greater potential to unite the world than to condemn it to perpetual wars. This potential rests in the strength of the ideals and values that they share.

All religions, for example, recognize the “Golden Rule” of reciprocity, which is the essential basis for the peaceful resolution of disputes. They also share a common respect for values of non-violence, the sanctity of human life, and the dignity of the individual person—our common humanity. And here we find another link to the United Nations, whose Charter begins with the words, “We the peoples”.

This combination of interfaith harmony and a growing harmony between the world’s religions and the work of the United Nations has enormous potential to advance the security and

welfare of all people. This is an inspiring thought indeed, as we commemorate “Interfaith Harmony Week” in this great chamber. It brightens the prospects for better worlds yet to come.