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Gender Justice: Why Peace Between Nations and Religions Eludes Us

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Hans Küng – Global Ethic Lecture

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I wish to thank the distinguished organisers of this Lecture: the Global Ethic Foundation of Switzerland, the Ecumenical Institute Lucerne and the Institute for Social Ethics ISE. As an Egyptian, Arab, North African, Muslim, woman (among many other identities), I recognise the honour, and the responsibility, of this opportunity you have offered me.

I do not take either for granted, or lightly. Particularly with the different wars raging (most notably in my Arab region of birth), the famines affecting millions, and the millions of others dying due to absolutely preventable man-made violence, particularly in times where international law and order are openly ridiculed by elected - and imposed - heads of state, particularly in times where fact and fiction either do not matter or are glaringly manipulated; particularly when being a Muslim is often seen as synonymous with terrorism at worst, or at best as people whom the Western hemisphere should take some pity on; particularly when I have experienced research, teaching and leading in service within international and multi religious spaces, and have witnessed – many times over – what it means to hold multiple identities which are systematically, systemically, individually and collectively othered (including in the name of peace and justice). For all these reasons, I do not take lightly the podium you have provided me, in these times, in our interconnected lives.

And I am also grateful for the opportunity to be with you in this beautiful city. As Michel Foucault sought to explain many years ago, space, after all, has its own power.

In my presentation today, I wish to ask you to see me as a sojourner – someone who is a temporary resident in a place, and thus keeps moving on. In the Bible, as many of you may know, the term "sojourner" is used to describe Christians who are not citizens of the world, but are instead temporary residents, and are expected to exemplify the values of heaven, and not to adopt the customs of the world. Let me be clear, I am a person of faith, but I most certainly do **not** exemplify heavenly values, and I **do** adopt the values of the world – in fact, I stand here in honour of a visionary man who argued prolifically and powerfully, of the necessity of common values for our coexistence – Prof Hans Kung.

I ask you to accompany me both in my various sojourns, as well as on my journey itself. Before we begin the journey, I share with you – just a peek into – where I am coming from on the matter of religions per se. I invite you to join me for a brief sojourn in the places where I see gender and religion engaging. This is where I ask you

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to see gender through my eyes, or better still, through a powerful astronomical telescope, but one which is *deeply sentient* - with a very high emotional IQ.

I will then meditatively walk with you to where religions and conflicts supposedly meet today – and from there to where interfaith dialogues, meant to realise peace between religions, serve today, and where they intersect (or not) with gender justice. My last sojourn is one where I will ask you to bear with me, as I challenge us all to imagine something different.

Positioning

“There was a time, when I blamed my companion if his religion did not resemble mine. Now, however, my heart accepts every form....Love alone is my religion.” Ibn al-Arabi²
(1165-1240)

Ibn Al-Arabi affirmed the transcendent unity of religions. A kind of unity which is based upon several esoteric and transcendent sameness upon which all kinds of beliefs, even non-belief, are anchored. It is crucial to bear in mind that the term transcendent unity of religions is not only possessed by perennial philosophers. The Sufis, led by Ibn al-Arabi, several centuries before the modern era, echoed the content of the terminology that we call in Arabic *wahdat al-adyan* (the unity of religions).

Dare I say, therefore, that before Hans Küng, there was Ibn al-Arabi. **And** there was also Emile Durkheim, whose work on the sacred offers a starting point for a public language for thinking about the moral basis for society.

Emile Durkheim's first key move in analyzing moral life was to locate it not in the private inner conscience of the superego, but in collective life. He understood the fundamental beliefs which shaped human life as essentially social phenomena. In his classic study, [The Elementary Forms of Religious Life](#), published over a 100 years ago, Durkheim wrote that individuals who make up a social group "feel bound to one another because of their common beliefs". Belief, as he argued, was not a matter of personal opinion or private religious experience, but "belongs to the group and unites it". Durkheim's perspective can be challenging. It draws us away from thinking about the inner authenticity of a person's beliefs to thinking about belief as a form of social practice and social experiences dependent on particular kinds of group activity.

In *The Elementary Forms*, Durkheim developed this understanding of the sacred much further. Rather than simply being a particular way of making sense of the world, the sacred was something that evoked deep emotions in people, giving them a sense of moral energy and conviction. It was something experienced through special forms of collective action, that drew groups together around a sacred object in ways that deepened people's sense of group identity and morality. Durkheim's sacred was not some kind of abstract reference to God, nor a universal mystical presence. It was a living social reality, dependent on social engagement to be charged into a powerful force. Once energized, this sacred could release a powerful, structuring influence on social life.

Durkheim was a committed social and political activist, who believed that it was necessary to understand the deep moral forces of social life precisely so that these could be harnessed in constructive ways. The past century and our present times, have given ample testimony of the power of these forces, inspiring not only civil rights, global humanitarian and environmental movements, but also being used to legitimise totalitarian government and even, genocide. I believe that by taking up Durkheim's intellectual project, we may begin to develop clearer ways of understanding the roots and forms of these powerful moral forces, as well as their enduring power in our lives today. And this is what I intend to do by sharing my understanding of gender, and gender justice.

² Ibn 'Arabī was an Andalusian Muslim scholar, mystic, poet, and philosopher, extremely influential within Islamic thought [1165 - 1240]

What has Gender Got to Do With It?

I see 'Gender' and Gender Justice as intrinsically connected with what Durkheim identifies as “the deep moral forces of social life”, and therefore also, with religions, and faiths. Gender is not just a social label or even only one of the social processes around us. It is about much more: who we are, what we feel, how we live, and how we interact with one another.

Gender Justice

Much has been written, in secular as well as faith-based (largely Christian) contexts, about gender justice. For the purposes of this paper, since I speak of both religious as well as more secularised spaces, I am using the definition of gender justice composed and used by the Global Fund for Women³. Thus, a term which signifies an intersectional approach which puts at its centre, “the diverse needs, experiences, and leadership of people most impacted by discrimination and oppression. This approach helps achieve both equity (equal distribution of resources, access, and opportunities) and equality (equal outcomes for all). The Global Fund states that the gender justice framework “means allowing for movements to define their own priorities and indicators of success... to mitigate the harm of discriminatory, racist, and toxic practices by traditional Global North philanthropists, institutions, and structures”⁴.

This reference to toxic practices by the traditional Global North spaces, brings us to geopolitics, most especially in this context, to the challenge of realising the global public good. A report by the United Nations Secretary General High Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism⁵, entitled *A Breakthrough for People and Planet: Effective and Inclusive Global Governance for Today and the Future*, provides comprehensive and detailed recommendations to strengthen the global architecture for peace, security and finance, deliver just transitions for climate and digitalisation, and ensure more equity and fairness in global decision-making. Along with recommendations to ensure the multilateral system (which includes civil society with faith-based organisations as part thereof) is more networked, more inclusive and more effective,

- **“Effective multilateralism is only possible if ... women and men are equally and meaningfully represented.”**

The report also argues that gender equality needs to be at the heart of a reinvigorated multilateral architecture. In fact, gender equality is noted as undergirding the “six transformational shifts”⁶ which frame this breakthrough. It follows that no transformative ability to realise the common good, including a more equal distribution of resources, access and opportunities, without gender justice.

Gender is defined as referring to the characteristics (of women, men, girls and boys) which are socially constructed. As such, it should be foundational to how we perceive ourselves, how we understand the world around us - including our physical, political, economic, and social-cultural environment - as well as how we perceive one another. Far from being 'limited' to a field of study of sexual relations and identities, gender, both informs, as well as is informed by, our way of seeing, being and behaving towards the world around us.

³ <https://www.globalfundforwomen.org/what-we-do/gender-justice/> - accessed on August 8, 2024.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Full disclosure, I serve as part of this Board.

⁶ The HLAB was appointed by UN Secretary-General António Guterres in March 2022 and consists of twelve “eminent persons”. The author is a member of this board which is co-chaired by former President of Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and former Prime Minister of Sweden, Stefan Löfven. The six transformational shifts which frame *A Breakthrough for People and Planet*. The recommendations in the report were informed by a global public consultation and build on wide-ranging inputs from diverse stakeholders (UN Member States, civil society, academia, youth, the private sector, in addition to inputs from entities across the UN system).

With this broad understanding of gender, gender equality is when all people should have total and equal access to all human rights at all times, regardless of their identity, self-image, nationality, ethnicity, race, or sexual orientation – or any other factor of distinction. Every individual should experience dignity and respect, no matter how they define themselves or who they are. This applies to everyone: to people with disabilities, to the young and the old, to people of all races. It should not matter, because it ultimately comes down to the fundamental understanding that we are, each, and all, human.

In short, we are actually talking about much more than the social construction of roles. This is about the entirety of our identity as *living species*. Gender is the foundation that links all other aspects of our being, together. Self-perception and the way we interact with one another are the basis of all relationships. That is why gender is so important.

Gender justice, therefore, becomes not only about accepting and promoting the rights of LGBTI+, together with relevant attitudes, legislation, and policies. Gender justice is - or should be - enabling a "whole of social justice" approach. I see gender justice, thus, as transcending sexuality (itself a huge realm), and integrating our attitudes towards the interconnected rights, and responsibilities, towards *sentient beings*.

My argument is that if and when we persist in seeing gender justice as referring only to relationships between men and women, boys and girls, and/or between masculine and feminine, and/or trans, non-binary and all other forms of distinction based on sexuality, we are actually more like a hamster running on a wheel - inside a cage. The hamster needs to run, the wheel is meant to turn, but the hamster remains inside a cage. Unless... the running on the wheel, opens the cage doors, and we can see not only the immediate environment around the cage, but the whole world around us.

Gender Justice, to me, should be an inviolable part of what Hans Küng believed to be a global ethic - i.e. a set of common values and ethical standards that could be shared by all faiths and belief systems.

But why do we need gender equality from a religious perspective? And what is justice—should everyone have the same rights? You may ask.

Justice is simply about us all having the same opportunities and responsibilities. And when you think about it, that is essentially what all faiths represent: In the eyes of the Creator, we are all equal in our nature. Effectively, all faiths, including Indigenous ones that see the sacred in nature, say that we should have equal access to everything that nature provides us. But we also have the obligation to respect one another and the nature that sustains us. We are responsible for creation.

How does gender play a role in this?

The reality is that it is primarily men who lead institutions and set the tone both religiously and politically. But this has not always been the case—in fact, there have been times in human history when women played key roles in government, communities, religion, philosophy, and everything else. And then there has been, and still is, a backlash. The more visible women are in positions of responsibility, the stronger this backlash becomes. Hildegard of Bingen is just one example of women who not only interpreted but also served and led communities. Unfortunately, over time, many women have been sidelined, and silenced, and male-dominated structures and institutions have become the centerpiece of all things religious.

So if we persist in seeing religions as institutions (churches/mosques/synagogues/temples, etc.), and/or as ordained leaders, and/or as scriptures and stories, and even when we expand our awareness to include NGOs inspired by religious values, we will still remain limited in our understanding. We will fail to see how religions inform - and are informed by - how people see the world, what they believe, and how they behave. If we see religions outside of the cages we tend to limit them to, we realise that religions, faith and belief are far more than theological texts, praxis, rituals, and whatever else. Rather, we are speaking of complex and complicated lived worldviews, which change as humanity itself changes.

Because of the way we have fragmented both religions and gender justice, we often see the influence of religion as either bad (rarely as good) for gender justice. I am guilty of doing this myself - I organised the first debate during one of the EU Development Days (in 2018), entitled precisely this: "Is religion good for gender justice?"

In broad brushstrokes only - since I cannot do justice to the relevant realms of enquiry in this lecture - the argument that religions are bad for gender justice, often relies on religious scriptures which supposedly deny the existence or justification for anything other than male or female, and by extension noting marriage as only acceptable to "God" when it is between a man and a woman. To be other than male or female, therefore, according to these perspectives of religion, is to be abnormal, abhorrent to God and society. And so on.

The argument that religions are 'good' for gender justice (again I stand guilty of gross generalisation here) is that the Maker/Creator/Divine/Etc. is merciful and loving, regardless of all the fuss made about our identities, and besides, He made us the way we are. And so on.

But what if - I challenge - what if we see our religious, faiths and belief systems, as fundamentally calling for gender justice - as a whole of justice encompassing all living entities, including our environment? How would this impact on the nexus between religions and conflict?

Religions and Conflicts

One of the great social theorists of the 20th century discusses the problem of violence in society, the way that so many of our religious and legal rituals are designed to quell the human urge for violence and reassert peace. He notes:

Religion instructs men as to what they must and must not do to prevent a recurrence of destructive violence when they neglect rights and violate prohibitions they call down upon themselves transcendent violence, which assumes the role of the demonic temptor – an illusion for which men will continue to fight, spiritually as well as physically, to the point of total annihilation...

We, the spoiled children of privilege, consider the god's anger as something illusory. In fact it is a terrible reality. Its justice is implacable, its impartiality truly divine. Anger shows no distinctions in its dealing with men; it is at one with reciprocity, with the irresistible tendency of violence to turn against the unfortunate beings who have sought to shape it exclusively to their own uses...

Because of their large-scale and sophisticated organization, modern Western societies have appeared largely immune to violence's law of retribution. In consequence, modern thinkers assume that this law is, and has always been, mere illusion and those modes of thinking that treat it as real are sheer phantasies. To be sure, these modes of thinking must be considered mythic insofar as they attribute the enforcement of the law to an authority extrinsic to man. But the law of retribution itself is very real; it has its origins in the reality of human relationships. If we are still strangers to this law it is not because we have managed to transcend it, but because its application to the modern world has been indefinitely postponed, for reasons unknown to us. That, perhaps, is what contemporary history is making clear (René Girard: 259-260 – emphasis added).

While the present day conflicts in Ukraine undermine Girard's argument about modern Western societies immunity to violence's law of retribution, his assertion that it has its origins in the reality of human relationships brings us right back to gender and gender justice.

In recent decades, religion has assumed some prominence in international affairs. A 2007 Economist issue entitled "In God's Name: A Special Report on Religion and Public Life", asserts that, if there ever was a global drift toward secularism, it has been halted, and probably reversed. Cited therein, Philip Jenkins, a noted scholar from Pennsylvania State University, predicts that when historians look back at this century they will see religion

as "the prime animating and destructive force in human affairs, guiding attitudes to political liberty and obligation, concepts of nationhood and, of course, conflicts and wars."

The events of September 11, 2001, the conflagration in Iraq, the aggressive assertiveness of quasi-theocratic Iran, the Zionist messianic influence in Israel, and the Russian Orthodox Church's justifications of the war on Ukraine, only confirm in the popular mind that religion lies behind much of contemporary international conflict.

Scholars like Marc Gopin, Luc Reyhler and Matthew Isaacs argue that the World Order cannot be understood without accounting for the role of religion and religious organizations. Reyhler argues that

In a world where many governments and international organizations are suffering from a legitimacy deficit, one can expect a growing impact of religious discourses on international politics. Religion is a major source of soft power. It will, to a greater extent, be used or misused by religions and governmental organizations to pursue their interests. It is therefore important to develop a more profound understanding of the basic assumption underlying the different religions and the ways in which people adhering to them see their interests. It would also be very useful to identify elements of commonality between the major religions".

In his research entitled "*sacred violence or strategic faith? Disentangling the relationship between religion and violence in armed conflict*", Matthew Isaacs develops a precise measure of the relevance of religion to conflict based on the use of religious rhetoric by political organizations. He disentangles the causal sequence linking religious rhetoric and violence using annually coded data on the rhetoric of 495 organizations worldwide from 1970 through 2012. **The analysis finds a strong general correlation between religious rhetoric and violence. However, he notes that past use of religious rhetoric does not increase the likelihood that an organization will participate in violence or the overall intensity of conflict.** "On the contrary, previous participation in violence makes an organization more likely to adopt religious rhetoric for mobilization. Indeed, religious rhetoric becomes more likely as violence increases in intensity and conflict continues for longer periods of time. These findings suggest that violent actors can also adopt religious rhetoric to solve the logistical challenges associated with violence, including access to mobilizing resources and recruitment and retention of members".

A common understanding among theorists and scholars, including political pundits, but also among relatively young journalists and thought leaders⁷ is that religious conflicts take place "*when adherents of one faith take to the extreme and force their religious views on those of other faiths, religious conflicts emerge*".

In such perceptions, so called 'religious conflicts' are reduced to being caused by intolerance against another's religious beliefs or practices. Such a perspective tends to see the conflict between Israel and Palestine as one between Muslims and Jews, the confessional tensions in India and Pakistan, tend to get perceived as between Hindus and Muslims, or Muslims and Christians, respectively. In short order, such perceptions then tend to argue that 'religious conflicts' are escalating dramatically, whereas the solution seems to be very simple: all religious parties just need to understand "the true essence" of their faith, rather than seeking to prove which religion, or which faith, is better than or superior to the other.

This form of simplistic argumentation maintains that religions are meant to create peace and unity among people, but that ignorance causes religious strife, and some politicians manipulate the ignorance of the majority to whip religious sentiments. This view also upholds that religious violence can be cured by "a deeper understanding of religion". The need for "religious literacy" among diverse policy makers – from diplomats to public health officials, is now a source of programmes and projects within governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental settings.

⁷ Such as Anna Shaukat, who self identifies as a student of social sciences at the National Defense University, in Islamabad, Pakistan.

On the other hand, David Smock, in a 2008 United States Institute of Peace publication entitled "Religion in World Affairs: Its Role in Conflict and Peace"⁸, argues that "no major religion has been exempt from complicity in violent conflict. Yet we need to beware of an almost universal propensity to oversimplify the role that religion plays in international affairs. Religion is not usually the sole or even primary cause of conflict". Smock makes a case for the important role which religions play on the side of 'the good', so to say. Religious leaders and institutions can mediate conflicts, communicate between opposing sides, and provide trainings in peacemaking methods. Smock states that religious communities are also opponents of repression and promoters of reconciliation, and he speaks to interfaith work being a form of peacemaking.

Glimpses into the Interfaith (multi-faith) Work

We are conscious that religions cannot solve the economic, political and social problems of this earth

Hans Küng

The Interfaith Imperative and Its Discontents

Let me begin by sharing that I believe my Muslim faith compels me to observe all faiths. Why? Because Islam is giving in to, or giving up to, the Divine, in all its forms and manifestations. One cannot give oneself to God by demeaning how God/Divine is perceived by others. One cannot serve the Divine by undermining His/It's creations, and creatures, ***or their ways of worship***.

As such, working with and serving all faiths, is not only an obligation, it is, in my learning, the passion of Islam. It is my passion. While at the United Nations, I co-founded two entities: an Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development, which brought together over 20 UN system entities (including WHO, the World Bank, etc.) working on and with issues of religion; and a Multi Faith Advisory Council of over 40 international faith-based NGO partners of the various UN system entities. I left the United Nations to serve Religions for Peace, one of the largest multi-religious international organisations founded over 50 years ago. I have served multi-religious organisations, collaborations and representations for nearly three decades.

And I can tell you, with certainty, that when religions come together in service to humanity, mountains can be moved. However, more often than not, international interfaith organizations are perhaps among the best exemplars of why peace between religions is not happening, and in turn, peace between nations remains illusive.

It is important to distinguish between the different types of interfaith organisations. One type are those that have religious leaders, formally representing their diverse religious institutions and/or communities, on their governing boards. An example of that is Religions for Peace, and the Interfaith Alliance for Protection of Children.

Another model of interfaith is those whose boards are made up entirely of lay people, with a deep passion and or commitment to work together as inspired by diverse faiths, such as the G-20 Interfaith Forum. A third, and much more common form, are those who have a mix of religious leaders and lay people on their Boards, and these include the likes of the Parliament of World Religions, as well as others like the United Religions Initiative (URI).

In all cases, these organisations are inclusive of diverse religions (or religious representatives). And in all these cases, the major aspect of their work is to meet, to dialogue, and to seek to do initiatives of diverse kinds together.

⁸ USIP Special Report, Feb 2008 / by: David Smock, United States Institute of Peace (USIP)

They work nationally, regionally and/or globally, on different development projects and programmes, including issues of poverty eradication, religious education, environment, children's rights, peacemaking, and so on. Some work with governments, some do not. As I learned when I headed Religions for Peace - and created the first and only multifaith Humanitarian Fund, in April 2023 - few interfaith organisations, actually *work together* on humanitarian relief efforts.

The interfaith organisations, more appropriately referred to as multi-religious, who have lay people on/in their Boards, are the ones most comfortable speaking to women's rights issues. But not necessarily on gender or gender justice.

Today, there is virtually a new 'interfaith' effort taking place, in some part of the world, almost on a daily basis. So the sites of interfaith work are becoming increasingly populated, although, as with the case with the United Nations over the years (as it grew to encompass over 60 different entities), this is not necessarily translating into better or more widespread service. And it is definitely not translating into an understanding of gender justice as necessary for the common good.

The original "guidelines of human behaviour", namely religions and their institutions, are the oldest standing and longest serving towards the common good. The original social service providers, everywhere in the world, remain religious institutions.

History shows, however, that several appear to have lost their way, over the centuries, by seeking to control and manipulate human behaviours, by maximising their own profits, exploiting natural resources, colluding with corrupt political or economic interests, practicing and excusing abuses, and generally behaving badly.

For sure, many faith leaders (of all forms of faith including Indigenous), have fought for justice - and many continue to die on its cross. But many religious institutions today, and even more religious leaders, are hard pressed to explain how they prevent conflicts (even as they attend multiple events about peace and environmental stewardship, and children's welfare, and a plethora of other good sounding fora with one another), and yet some (state and non-state actors) will kill, maim, and ignore laws and legal institutions, in the name of their religious beliefs. It is not the 'fault' of religious institutions and religious leaders that some kill and maim in the name of their faith. But are they also to be totally absolved of such atrocities, when among them are those who collude (either actively or through silence) with politicians and institutions of power?

Voltaire once said "anyone who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities". I believe it to be an absurdity that some religious institutions, and religious leaders, will actually maintain that they do not need human rights, nor do they see their value added, and some are openly antagonistic to them. Those who do so, fail to see a very simple reality: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights enshrines the common values inherent in any and all religions, faiths and belief systems.

Those who look down on human rights, or are ignorant of them, or see them as tools of the West (at best), are deliberately blinding themselves to the fact that any violation of human rights, is a violation of a global ethic. To start on the road to undermining any human right (or indeed to favour one or some over others, to "cherry pick select human rights" as I have written elsewhere), is to secure the end of accountable governance, participation, and thus irrevocably harm the means of co-existence.

In short, where and when interfaith dialogue does not strengthen gender justice and honour human rights - as we have witnessed to be the case - we can not realise any form of peace.

Gender Justice and Interfaith work

Interfaith organizations – particularly those which draw upon the representation and legitimacy of religious institutions among their members, will at best, pay lip service to gender. The usual mantra is "we love our sisters, our wives, our mothers" or variations thereof. As if loving one's female relatives was an act of favouring women, let alone seeing them - and treating them - as equals in rights and responsibilities. Have you noticed that few women will actually claim that because they love their menfolk (brothers, fathers, husbands, etc.), therefore they see them as equals? It is an illogical argument. Because justice is not about loving the men or the women around one. It is about believing that regardless of sex and sexual identity and any other feature of dissonance or diversity, all living creatures deserve a fair chance to live, and live with access to all their needs, together.

Usually, the "interfaith nature" will require faith leaders who are prepared to accept the inherent dignity of other faiths, and are comfortable in one another's presence. So I tend to see, and say, that these are rather **special faith leaders**. Those who are perhaps, most merciful towards one another and their communities.

Among these fairly special types of religious leaders – ordained and including women (not only men) involved in international interfaith work, few will think, or openly say, that they are against women or equal rights for women or against gender justice. In fact, when I facilitated a meeting of nearly 200 of them at the end of 2019, to come up with a 5 year Strategic Plan for Religions for Peace, they claimed to be in favour of a goal (one of six corresponding with the Sustainable Development Goals), of their joint international interfaith endeavours, to be on women's rights and gender equality.

Even fewer of these special religious leaders, will speak openly against human rights.

But even fewer still will understand, and speak openly - let alone work together - for gender justice. To date, that is a bridge too far, even among the most special of religious leaders. I believe this explains why despite the abundance of interfaith dialogues today, conflicts exist everywhere.

A few more aspects about interfaith work:

To date, interfaith dialogue has focused on actual meetings between people of diverse faiths, where each speaks to the wealth of their respective values. These are essential, but clearly insufficient. An unwritten understanding of such meetings is that there is no advocacy for any one religion, or a new unified religion of any sort. These concerns are important to secure respect for each faith, and to eliminate any concerns about proselytization or evangelization (from any faith tradition). While I acknowledge that it is important to continue to ensure respect for the diverse traditions, it is also time to ask some critical questions about interfaith dialogues:

- Is there an interfaith language? Is the Global Ethic - PoWR - an interfaith manifesto? If so, how come it is not part of the lexicon or an instructor of the strategic direction(s) and priorities informing programmes and initiatives, of all the world's leading interfaith organisations?
- Is it enough to have interfaith dialogues only as conversations? In other words, why do we not see more joint multifaith programmes/ projects/initiatives?
- How are interfaith or multifaith dialogues and their institutions, held accountable?

Final Sojourn: Imagining Gender Justice as “All My Relations”

*“Inclusive, effective multilateralism requires a fundamental transformation towards more distributed, networked, and accountable decision-making for our collective well-being” –
UN SG HLAB Report*

Now, I step away from monotheism and its discontents, and step into the realms of the original faiths – Indigenous traditions and language (in North America), where interconnectedness itself, is sacred⁹. In other words, where gender justice appears to be a *sine qua non* of faith and lifestyle.

Traditional Native Americans feel a sense of interconnectedness at a deep level. They connect the physical to the emotional to the spiritual, within each other, as well as to one another and the natural world. The whole community of creation is connected to their sense of civic responsibilities. In Indigenous thinking, there is no such thing as separation of one part of life from another.

An example of the interconnectedness is found among the Lakota. Some of the most basic structures to Lakota life were the warrior societies. Yet there existed (and remains) a lifeway of harmony, expressed through a belief in the interrelatedness of all things. This included, for the Lakota, all the Sioux tribes, other tribes, and other humans, as well as all the animals, birds, insects, plants, and the rest of the community of creation.

Giving credence to this idea—that all people and things are related to one another—opens us to immense possibility. What if we once again saw ourselves as family to the whole community of creation? We must come to the realization that all the world is our relative.

By realizing the connectedness of humankind to all animal and plant life, the Lakota believe that we become aware of new possibilities for preserving all living things. In humanity's dependence on the Earth, the Lakota and others believe we can learn to sustain our planet and can find fresh prospects for nurturing food, conserving water, and developing renewable energy. All this and more is contained in their two simple prayer words: *mitakuye oyasin*, “All my relations.”

An Iroquois teacher: Tadodaho, also known as Chief Leon Shenandoah, comments:

The most important thing is that each individual must treat all others, all the people who walk on Mother Earth, including every nationality, with kindness. When people turn their thoughts to the Creator, they give the Creator power to enter their minds and bring good thoughts. The most difficult part of this is that the Creator desired that there be no bloodshed among human beings and that there be peace, good relations, and always a good mind.

Like the Lakota concept of *mitakuye oyasin*, the Iroquois philosophy seeks to bring all people together in one accord by recognizing that all people and creation are inter-connected.... This way of living is affirmed among various Native peoples, so many of whom have a common value of harmony. Ojibway elder Eddie Benton Banai writes, “today, we should use these ancient teachings to live our lives in harmony with the plan that the Creator gave us. We are to do these things if we are to be the natural people of the Universe.”

- What if we were to realise that our religions/faiths/beliefs, far from being limited to judging (as bad or good or even as inconsequential) and regulating our sexualised gender identities, they are, in fact, about seeking - nay demanding - a balance between all forms of life. Such that no one life, or one way of life, or one worldview is better than another, as long as we are able to secure access to resources, opportunities and nurturing payback (= justice), for *all -- including* the planet we live on...?
- What if a Global Ethics which would help to achieve peace between religions - as Hans Küng advocated and warned - demands that religions make peace by **servicing gender justice – as an indivisible part of human rights?**

New York – Lucerne, November, 2024

⁹ Wisdom shared by Randy and Edith Woodley, from the Center for Action and Contemplation - <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/all-my-relations/>

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