

**“The Peace between Religions in a World of Crisis”
(Human Rights Students Forum)**

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Contents

1. Opening by Professor Karen Kong.....	2
2. “Reversing Carl Schmitt: The enemy as the existential self” by Samuel Lissner	2
3. “Faith – based belief and violent scriptures in the context of the Koran” – by Michael Foran.....	3
4. “The Politics of Islamic Extremism” by Shah Ali Fahrad	4
5. “Religion at the Crossroads: Some Lessons from the Balkans” by Inna Amesheva.....	6
6. “Mindanao conflict in the Philippines” by Leah Angela Robis	7
7. “Advancing civilization: Perspectives from the Baha'i Faith” by Temily Jaya Gopan	8
8. “On the foundation of human rights” A Christian Perspective” by Professor Andrew Loke.....	10

1. **Opening** – by Professor Karen Kong (LLM Human Rights Programme Director)

- Significance of topic
 - Religion has a great influence in every aspect of our lives, both personal and political
 - Dalai Lama: “When there is peace amongst religions, there will be peace in the world”

2. **“Reversing Carl Schmitt: The enemy as the existential self”** – by Samuel Lissner

- Introduction
 - In Europe, the economic and political order is off balance
 - ⇒ The Ukrainian crisis remains unresolved
 - ⇒ The Islamic State is infiltrating the Mediterranean vicinity, and appears to be planning an attack on Italy and Southern Europe from the Libyan coast
 - There has been a general change of attitudes amongst people to a more conservative approach which is less tolerant of different religions / cultures within society
- Enemy friend Distinction developed by Carl Schmitt in his text: *The Concept of the Political* (1927)¹
 - (i) The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced to that between friend and enemy
 - (ii) The distinction of friend and enemy denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or disassociation
 - (iii) But he [the enemy] is nevertheless, the other, the stranger: and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in his specifically intense way, **existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible**
 - It is not race, religion, nation, class or capital which makes men enemies
 - The quality of enemy lies in the person being socially different from the self.
 - Group membership and a sense of identity are at its foundation
 - In order to understand the nature of social antagonism, a renaissance of essentialism may be necessary
 - Schmitt distinguishes between ‘public enemy’ and ‘private enemy’
 - ⇒ The ancient Greek word used for ‘enemy’ in the Christian concept of “love your enemy” (Mathew 5:44, Luke 6:27) refers to a private enemy, not a public enemy
 - ⇒ The enemy – friend distinction is evident in the struggle between Christians and Muslims for centuries
- Inalienable obligation to see members of the Islamic State as humans
 - Beyond the enemy-friend distinction, we share essential human needs such as security, care and protection

¹ Schmitt, Carl. *The Concept of the Political*. Rutgers University Press, 1927

- By portraying “Muslims” as evil, terrorists or monsters, we deny our own contribution to the conflict

- Conclusion: Enemy as the existential self

- The key to overcoming the antagonism between enemy and friend lies in transcending social polarity
- The right to exist of the self implies the right to exist of the other. Denying these rights leads to violent self-empowerment, as seen with the emergence of the Islamic State.
- If we accept the other as part of the self, the antagonism disappears
- The enemy is not an existential other, he is part of ourselves – he is the existential self

- Issues raised in Q&A

1. Suggested steps to resolve the political crisis in Middle East with regard to ISIS
 - ⇒ Integrate the Sunni community against ISIS by building a political bridge beyond radicalism
 - ⇒ Bombing civilians will only worsen the situation, as the only political recourse for them is ISIS
 - ⇒ Although the social atrocities committed by ISIS should not be excused, there must be greater understanding of social dynamics
2. How to balance secular concept of the law (man-made, grounded in reason) with laws and customs that are based on religious principles
 - ⇒ It is essentially a balancing exercise: Oppressive practices should not be tolerated. However, in some cases, intolerance manifests into discrimination of certain religions and cultures. This, in turn, leads to a deterioration of conditions of society.
 - ⇒ Example of a compromise: German approach to male circumcision
 - ⇒ The German court ruled that circumcision was illegal, as it constituted a violation of the physical integrity of the child.
 - ⇒ Subsequently, the federal government made a proposal to legalize circumcision under the condition that the procedure was performed by doctors

3. “**Faith – based belief and violent scriptures in the context of the Koran**” – by Michael Foran

- Introduction

- Aim of speech is to dispel two myths
- Myth 1: All religions are essentially the same
- Myth 2: Islam is a religion of peace

- Myth 1: All religions are essentially the same

- Faith is the belief in a proposition without evidence
- Every religion preaches different things
- **Extremism is not inherently dangerous**, but only dangerous when coupled with dangerous beliefs e.g. Judaism and Quakerism are based primarily on the idea of pacifism

- Myth 2: Islam is a religion of peace

- Islam is an incredibly practical religion

- The Koran contains provisions on war, namely what is permissible / not permissible in times of war
- This is dangerous, as faith does not have to be subject to reason or evidence
- **When someone truly believes that violence is justified, it is hard to change their perception if it is based on faith**
- There is a fundamental difference between Islam and Christian doctrine:
 - ⇒ According to the Islamic faith, the Koran is the *literal* word of God spoken through the prophet Muhammad. It is the recitation of God's will.
 - ⇒ Christians believe the Bible was written by people *inspired* by God, and is not word-for-word dictation
 - ⇒ It is easier to put the Bible in its historical and political context (e.g. practice of stoning adulterers, references to slavery are not taken literally) as it was written in the social context of people who were fallible
- When faced with **political and economic conflict**, it is easy for people to perceive that they are at war and that the provisions in their holy text become applicable in their particular set of circumstances
- Many within the Muslim community feel that the West is at war with them, which has led to the organizations such as ISIS

- Issues raised in Q&A

1. It is confusing to say that Islamists are fundamentalists and extremists – they have many reasons to be angry (e.g. they were attacked illegally in 2003 in Iraq)
 - ⇒ Many who hold religious beliefs will believe that punishment should be done by the organized State → this is the default position
 - ⇒ However, when people feel they are under attack and the State has failed them (e.g. community attacked by the West or family killed in an airstrike), calls to war within Koran become more convincing and people will act upon those texts

4. “The Politics of Islamic Extremism” – by Shah Ali Fahrad

- Introduction
 - While religion is one of the factors behind many of today's conflicts, it is not the root cause
 - Conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Palestine, and to some extent Pakistan, are mainly driven by politics, essentially it is a fight over resources
 - We should strive for a secular and pluralist society based on the idea of human rights and dignity
 - States should remain neutral as to questions of religion
- Definition of 'extremist Islam'
 - A literal and dogmatic approach to religious scripture which leaves no scope for varying interpretations or contextual basis
 - Extremists do not only consider the West or non-Muslims to be their enemies. Muslims who do not subscribe to their absolutist views of religion are also considered enemies.
- The biggest victims of extremist Islam are Muslims

- 2011 report by the US government's National Counter-Terrorism Centre (NCTC) said: "In cases where the religious affiliation of terrorism casualties could be determined, Muslims suffered between 82% and 97% of terrorism-related fatalities over the past five years."
- Recent example: On 16 December 2014, an attack on a school by the Taliban killed 145, including Muslim 132 children
- Support for extremist Islam is very low
 - 2013 Report by Pew Research Centre shows that the majority of the Muslim community (93%) do not support extremism
 - This is corroborated by a large-scale survey conducted by Gallup pollsters and US academic John L. Esposito in his book *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think*, based on six years of research and 50,000 interviews with Muslims in more than 35 countries
 - It was found that not a single respondent of the 50,000 interviewed cited the Quran in defence of terrorism
 - The 7% of Muslims who sympathised with the 9/11 attacks defended their position on secular political justifications: "They kill our civilians. We can kill theirs"
- What motivates violent extremists in Islam then?
 - According to American social anthropologist Lee Ross, we have a general tendency to overestimate the importance of internal motivations relative to environmental / external influences on human behaviour (he calls this the "fundamental attribution error")
 - If we look at conflicts, it is easy to draw the distinction that people are motivated by religion dogma. However, this is a superficial view that does not accord with reality.
 - Forensic psychiatrist Marc Sageman, an academic and former CIA operations officer based in Pakistan in the late 1980s, said in his book² said for extremists, "religion has a role to but it is a role of justification."
 - People from Al Qaeda or ISIS use religion to advance a political vision, rather than using politics to advance a religious vision
 - Therefore we have to locate terrorism and extremism in local conflicts rather than in sweeping ideological narratives
 - A similar thesis may be derived from experience of former al-Qaeda operatives
 - ⇒ A former FBI agent, Ali H Soufan who led the bureau's pre-9/11 investigation into al-Qaeda observed: "When I first began interrogating al-Qaeda members, I found that while they could quote Bin-Laden's sayings by heart, I knew far more of the Quran than they did – in fact some barely knew classical Arabic, the language of both the *hadith* and the Quran."
- Conclusion: Greater emphasis must be placed on political factors and simple economics
 - Saudi Arabia, one of the state sponsors of extremism and most conservative Muslim countries, is one of the US' biggest allies
 - We cannot discount the role of international politics in conflicts
- Issues raised in Q&A
 - 1. People have argued that Islam itself is a problem and rejected President Obama's claim that Islam is peaceful

² Understanding Terror Networks and Leaderless Jihad

- ⇒ There may need to be a search for a solution within Islam
- 2. Political insurgency and resistance to oppression
 - ⇒ Insurgent character of the conflict is very important. Religion has been used as a source of solidarity.
 - ⇒ ISIS has taken the insurgency one step further by setting up their own state, with the view that their problems cannot be fixed by simply attacking the West

5. **“Religion at the Crossroads: Some Lessons from the Balkans”** – by Inna Amesheva

- Introduction
 - Aim to provide a historical and personal account of religion at a crossroads from the perspective of a person with dual ethnicities (Bulgarian and Turkish)
 - The Balkans are situated at the bridge between the East and the West, and is the link between Europe and Asia
 - Many Asian cultures have passed through the Balkans and battled for influence. These battlegrounds have produced a lot of diversity in cultures and nationalities.
- Influence of religion in the Balkans
 - Religion has enabled the Balkan people to unite during times of conflict. For example, in Bulgaria, religion was often seen as the symbol that kept the national identity together during the 500 years of Ottoman rule.
 - On the other hand, religion has also been a source of conflict. Differences between religion in the Balkans have resulted in the Yugoslavia conflict, in which there were between 130,000 to 140,000 casualties with 4 million people displaced.
 - We can trace these conflicts to historical roots and conditions within society
- Conclusion: Room for tolerance
 - In order to overcome such conflicts, people need to exercise tolerance and learn how to peacefully co-exist
 - We must embrace differences as a source of strength.
 - To give an example, by broadcasting Bulgarian national news in Turkish, this shows tolerance towards the Turkish minority in Bulgaria (around 10% of population).
- Issues raised in Q&A

1. Whether religion played a part in Yugoslavia conflict
 - ⇒ Ethnic tensions between former Yugoslavian provinces resulted in ethnic cleansing and war crimes
 - ⇒ However, one cannot isolate religious identity from ethnic identity, as ideas of nationalism also constitute a belief
 - ⇒ In ethnic, religious and cultural conflicts, there is the common notion that a particular social group must defend themselves from attack
2. Whether integration is to be preferred over isolation
 - ⇒ In a global society, it is impracticable to separate people
 - ⇒ Delineating territories according to social or religious beliefs would result in even greater conflict

⇒ It appears that the situation of failed states gives rise to religious conflicts. The root of conflicts may not necessarily religious, but has more to do with the imposition of values on others.

6. “Mindanao conflict in the Philippines” – by Leah Angela Robis

- Introduction
 - The origin of the Mindanao conflict is uncertain, however religious differences have been raised as a cause
 - Although the secessionist movement separates the Christian majority from the “Bangsamoro” or the Islamic minority, religion did not play a role in the conflict
 - Instead, mutual distrust between the groups have given rise to the conflict and their respective lack of sincerity exacerbates the problem

- Historical background of the Mindanao conflict
 - The Bangsamoro consistently questioned the inclusion of its ancestral domain, the island of Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago, in the Philippine republic
 - The armed struggle began in 1972 led by the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). The group’s primary objective was to gain independence from the Philippine republic
 - Although the MNLF acceded to autonomy through the execution of the Tripoli agreement with the Philippine government in 1976, the Bangsamoro’s right to autonomy and self determination was not recognized until 1988 upon the ratification of a new constitution
 - The Organic Law for the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindano (ARMM) was enacted in 1989, but the region was only created in 1996
 - The government neutralized the MNLF, and supposedly integrated the movement into its fold. The organization’s founder and chairperson, Misuari, became the ARMM’s first duly elected governor

- The creation of the ARMM did not bring peace to Mindanao
 - The delay in the implementation of the Tripoli agreement resulted in dissatisfaction amongst certain members in the MNLF, who left the organization to form the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)
 - After the neutralization of the MNLF by the government, the MILF continued the armed insurgency
 - By 2001, the MILF agreed to negotiate peace with the government. However, the MNLF continued the armed insurgency abandoned by the MILF after Misuari’s term as ARMM governor.
 - The Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain negotiated between the MILF and the Philippine government was declared “fatally defective” by the Supreme Court of the Philippines in the North Cotabato decision
 - The Court reasoned that the prescribed “associative relationship” between the national and Bangsamoro governments contemplated the creation of a sub-state, which derogated Philippine sovereignty over Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago
 - Nonetheless, the government and the MILF continued negotiations and signed the Framework Agreement in 2013, followed by the corresponding bill for the Bangsamoro Basic Law in Congress in 2014

- However, peace remains elusive to Mindanao. In 2013, the MNLF attacked Zamboanga, proving that the movement is still very much alive
- A faction of the MILF unhappy with the result of the peace negotiations formed the Bangsamoro Independence Freedom Fighters (BIFF), which took part in the massacre of 44 members of the Philippine National Police while serving warrants for the arrest of international terrorists hiding in a MILF stronghold
- Mutual distrust between parties
 - The government substantially delayed giving the Bangsamoro autonomy and is reluctant to recognize the minority's right to self-determination
 - The North Cotabato decision ignores the principle in international law which holds that the exercise of self determination by a minority cannot prejudice the sovereignty of existing states
 - On the part of the secessionist movements, it appears that none of the groups truly wanted peace as the integration of the MNLF into mainstream society proved to be coterminous with Misuari's term as ARMM governor.
 - The hiding of international terrorists further arouses suspicion
- Both parties lack sincerity
 - The government has not ensured the full and effective implementation of the present Organic Law
 - Although Islam is recognized as the primary religion in the region, and there is a mandate to preserve Bangsamoro culture, no mechanism exists to allow the ARMM to influence policy towards it at the national level
 - The emergence of new secessionist groups from old ones undermines finality of peace negotiations with the government
- Conclusion: A more inclusive solution is needed
 - The government must encourage greater participation from all sectors of society
 - It must begin with the full and effective implementation of the present Organic Law, and amend its provisions to allow the better exercise of self-determination
 - The conflict is not caused by religious differences, but mutual distrust and lack of sincerity between the government and secessionist groups
- Issues raised in Q&A

<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Whether the government should hold peace talks with armed groups<ul style="list-style-type: none">⇒ It may be wrong for the government to continue its negotiation strategy as it leads to the emergence of new secessionist groups⇒ These groups do not truly represent the Bangsamoro minority, as they are a small portion of the total Muslim population in the Philippines

7. **“Advancing civilization: Perspectives from the Baha’i Faith”** – by Temily Jaya Gopan

- Introduction
 - The Baha’i Faith has a very distinct perspective on the role of religion in social progress

- Due to time constraints, the speaker will not give an overview of secularisation. However, the issue of when and why the dichotomy between religion and secularism came about is essential to understanding the role of religion within society
- In many countries, including developed nations, religion continues to play a major public role
- Secularism cannot be taken for granted as a universal faith that every society is inevitably moving towards
- The issue is therefore: what else can guarantee a harmonious global society that is tolerant and free of religious extremism and violence?

- Religion in development
 - The only sustainable way forward is for change to happen within religions themselves
 - Religions can be perceived as historically, socially and politically embedded traditions. As with all traditions, they are dynamic and capable of responding to new social realities
 - Religions should be constantly self-reflecting and engage in dialogue with the community
 - Religious fundamentalism has no place in this approach as fundamentalists refuse to subject their actions to scrutiny and dialogue
 - There is a need for multidisciplinary studies that include theological, sociological, legal and political perspectives, as the way in which academic disciplines are carved out is itself a product of secularization

- Key principle of Baha'i Faith
 - The purpose for the creation of mankind is to carry forward an ever advancing civilization which includes both material and spiritual prosperity
 - From this perspective, both science and religion are systems of knowledge that guide the journey of advancing humanity
 - Scientific truth is not absolute, but relative to the paradigm within which it operates. Similarly, religious truth is also relative.
 - Members of the Baha'i Faith believe that religion is progressive and revealed in successive stages according to the needs of humanity at a particular time
 - Religion provides a framework of principles, but the application of these teachings depends on social reality, and requires consultation free from ego involving every member of that community

- Conclusion
 - Through the process of consultation guided by a spiritual framework, unity is safeguarded and society is free from dogma
 - Every individual is involved in the generation and diffusion of knowledge
 - This principle of the Baha'i Faith potentially overcomes the duality of faith and reason
 - Quote from Baha'i texts: "If religion is opposed to reason and science, faith is impossible...there is no contradiction between true religion and science. When a religion is opposed to science, it becomes mere superstition"

- Issues raised in Q&A
 - 1. How to reconcile the idea that all prophets (such as Jesus and Muhammad) are sent by a supreme being with the fact that prophets from different religions teach fundamentally different things

- ⇒ According to the Baha’i Faith, a revelation of a particular prophet differs in accordance with the social context at the time
 - ⇒ A supreme being refers to something transcendental, which is beyond human understanding. From the Baha’i perspective, when you look at religious scriptures, every faith predicts its future continuation and establishes different traditions that lead in that general trajectory
 - ⇒ The Baha’i faith takes the view that all religions of the past as united. There is harmony amongst religions.
2. Challenges to the actualization of the “Religion in Development” approach and how to overcome these challenges
- ⇒ The limitations to the notion that religion and development are intertwined is that some people within religions do not want to change
 - ⇒ The key to overcoming this challenge is to accept the existence of multiple religions, encourage interfaith dialogue and stop the antagonism which currently exists between religions

8. **“On the foundation of human rights” A Christian Perspective** – by Professor Andrew Loke

- Introduction

- Historically, the Christian faith has been instrumental in promoting equality
- As Jürgen Habermas, the eminent German sociologist and philosopher observes:

“Egalitarian universalism, from which sprang the ideas of freedom and social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, of the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct heir of individual morality of conscience, human rights, and democracy, is the direct heir to the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. *This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it. And in the light of the current challenges of a postnational constellation, we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle postmodern talk.*”³

- Many leading thinkers, both Christians and non- Christians have argued that it is difficult to find an adequate ontological basis for justifying egalitarian universalism without belief in God⁴

- The idea of human dignity and equality is not ‘obvious’

- To give a few examples from historical experiences, communities have believed that women have no right to vote, or that Jews and darker-skinned people have no right to equal treatment
- The idea that all human beings have equal worth and dignity “cannot be based on perception. We only perceive that people are equal in some respect and unequal in others. From experience, we cannot derive essential human equality” (Stackhouse and Healy 1996)

³ From ‘Conversation about God and the World.’ *Time of transitions*. Cambridge: Polity Press 2006, pp150-151

⁴ Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008

- Christian theism provides an ontological basis for human rights
 - “In a religious context every human being is considered sacred. Accepting a universal common father gives rise to a common humanity...The concept of human beings created in the image of God certainly endows men and women with a worth and dignity which the components of a comprehensive human rights system can flow logically.”⁵
 - The Bible stresses that all humans have one Father (Mal. 2:10), which establishes the notion of brotherhood within humankind
 - The creation of people in God’s image, and the belief that all humans are loved by God, also provides basis for the argument that all humans have equal worth and should be treated with the same dignity
 - The view that humans are created by God has been influential historically in promoting human rights e.g. US Declaration of Independence (1776) states that ‘*All men are created equal, that they are endowed, by their Creator, with certain unalienable rights*’

- Religion is consistent with science
 - . In the Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science published by Oxford University Press, John Polkinghorne, the eminent physicist from Cambridge University writes:

‘Scientists feel genuine wonder at the rational beauty thus revealed to their inquiry...Science itself can offer no explanation of why the universe should be like this, but the fact of deep and satisfying cosmic intelligibility does not seem to be something that should be treated as just a happy accident...Science surveys a world whose order makes it appear shot through with signs of mind, and the religious believer can affirm that this is so because it is indeed the Mind of God that is revealed in the works of creation.’ (pp 62 – 4)

- Clarifications
 - (i) Non-believers in God also recognize human rights as good
 - ⇒ From the Christian perspective, God has put the moral law in human conscience, such that most people recognize certain basic moral principles.
 - ⇒ However, the human conscience is capable of being distorted e.g. if a person persists in violating human rights, he/she can become numb to his/her conscience
 - ⇒ For many people, their conscience has not been numbed to the extent that they do not recognize that egalitarian universalism is good, however they are unable to explain the ontological basis for why egalitarian universalism is true. Christian Theism can explain this basis

 - (ii) Belief in God is not by itself a sufficient condition for equal human rights
 - ⇒ The kind of God a person believes in, and whether the person consistently follows his/her belief is also relevant to the due recognition of human rights
 - ⇒ For example, belief in a God who does not love all humans, or the misuse of any ideology may prevent the attainment of equal rights

 - (iii) However, belief in God can provide a consistent **ontological foundation** for human rights

⁵Shestack, J. Jerome, “The Philosophic Foundations of Human Rights,” (1998) 20 *Human Rights Quarterly* 201, at pp. 205-6, 216-7

- Conclusion: Religion can make important contributions to the promotion of human rights
 - The idea that ‘science has disproved theism and we now live in a secularised world’ is a myth; theism continued to be defended in publications of the highest academic level, and there is re-emergence of religion as a potent social and political force in recent years across the world
 - The way forward is not to naively attack religion, but to encourage people to find resources within religion to promote peace between religions

- Issues raised in Q&A

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What if there is a conflict between human right sand Christianity e.g. the case of homosexuality?<ul style="list-style-type: none">⇒ The reason people object to homosexuality may not depend on faith, as many non-Christians also object to homosexuality⇒ Affirming human rights does not entail that all kinds of human behaviour are morally acceptable⇒ The identification of the underlying philosophical understanding as to what it means to be human is of key importance2. How can Christianity provide a foundation for human rights if different Christians conflict in their own views e.g. concerning the Kingdom of God?<ul style="list-style-type: none">⇒ The doctrine of the Kingdom of God is not solely about life after death, but also about making the world into a better place⇒ Many Christians fail to understand this, which leads to conflict⇒ A correct understanding provides a foundation for the promotion of human rights |
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