

Faith and Protection  
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## Introduction

Very warm greetings to all. It is my joy to partake in this important Symposium. The organizers have my deepest appreciation.

This afternoon, I would like to begin by reflecting on a “revolution” that is taking place among the world’s religious communities. It is the revolution of learning how to become religiously “bi-lingual.” When diverse religious communities become bi-lingual they can more easily discern together their shared moral care. Shared care, in turn, calls for common action. Events here in Japan helped to animate this revolution of “religious bi-lingualism” and to unleash its practical, action-oriented significance around the world.

Second, I would like to focus on the language we use for refugees and asylum seekers. While the legal distinctions that are essential for UNHCR have enduring importance, I want to suggest that two notions championed by religious communities can have great significance. These notions are: “human dignity” and “shared security.”

Third, I would like to reflect briefly on the “procedure” or “method” that can be useful in mobilizing the concrete strengths that religious communities can bring to the challenges that accompany refugees and asylum seekers.

### I. Religious Bi-lingualism

Just 43 years ago, some 250 senior religious leaders from all major religions and continents boarded planes for Japan. As their planes took off, they were in a real sense heading into the future. They were attending what the British historian,

Arnold Toynbee, observed as an historic event: for the first time in recorded history, the world's diverse religious leaders gathered themselves around the fundamental challenges of peace. They didn't gather to debate and defend their differing doctrines. Those still valid concerns were for other forums. Rather, they gathered as allies to face together forces that were menacing the entire human family. Would the world annihilate itself in a nuclear war? That was the crisis of that hour. It was in response to that crisis that the World Conference of *Religions for Peace* was born here in Japan in 1970.

That meeting has proved to have enduring value. Beyond the urgent specific topics it addressed, beyond the projects it initiated—including one focused on refugees from Vietnam, beyond providing stimulus for building *Religions for Peace (WCRP)* around the globe, that meeting helped to foster a fundamental “shift” in the consciousness of the world's religious communities. That shift in awareness is the recognition that—today—religious communities need to be “bi-lingual,” and that being bi-lingual is the key to effective multi-religious action.

The first language that each religious community needs is the one it has always spoken. I would like to call it “religious primary language” and it refers to what Hindus or Buddhists or Christians or Muslims, or any other religious groups accept as their own religion-specific language.

The second language I would like to call “shared public” language. The term “public” is perhaps better than the word “secular,” because the latter is historically freighted with anti-religious sentiments.

Today, religious communities are learning to speak in both languages.

Let me give an example:

Think with me of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. You recall that in his day American society was marred by a form of apartheid. Especially in the South of the USA, people of African descent had to sit in the back of buses, use different public water fountains, restrooms and lunch counters. They were systematically denied equal rights.

Follow Dr. King in your mind's eye as he goes into a small church. He preaches using his own religious primary language. He's a Christian, so for him his religious primary language is the language of Christianity. In his sermon to fellow believers, he uses his own religious primary language to illumine what he understands to be the God-given dignity of all people and therefore the wrongness of apartheid. And the hearts of the congregants in his small church

burn with inspiration when they listen to him. They commit themselves precisely as religious believers to engage in religiously motivated non-violent action for the priceless dignity of all.

Now follow Dr. King as he goes out of his small church and walks a few blocks to the Washington monument on the capital's great mall. He does not change as a person as he walks. He is still the same religious man committed to his particular religion. But, he cannot give the same religious sermon that he just delivered in the small church. For standing in front of him are some 500,000 people, and they are from every religion and none. He cannot give his message using his Christian primary language, because that language is not shared by all those gathered. Rather, he has to creatively "re-say" his religiously rooted concern in a second "public" language. In this situation, he needs to use public language as the medium of his religiously rooted care. So, he speaks in public language about "civil rights" and he uses public moral arguments. And, the people gathered—despite their different backgrounds—lock arms and unite in a common cause.

In short, Dr. King became religiously bi-lingual. He used Christian language when he was talking among Christians, but he was also able to shift gears and re-express his religiously-rooted concerns in public language when the situation called for it.

Those 250 religious leaders who boarded planes to come here to Japan 43 years ago also learned how to become religiously bi-lingual. Each held on to the richness of his or her respective religious primary language. But each also knew that this was not enough if he or she was to tackle global problems together. So, each worked to "transpose" their religiously rooted care into a shared public language of "common cause," a language of "common moral purpose," a language of "common commitment to take action."

I have taken the time to dwell on this because becoming religiously bi-lingual can help us as we try to tackle together the challenges of immigration and asylum seeking. Religious communities can discern deeply held and widely "shared care" regarding immigration issues. "Shared care," in turn, calls for "common action." Public language is the language of partnership between the diverse religions and among all stakeholders.

## II. A Multi-Religious "Horizon" for Migration

Language is important. The way we frame things—the breadth or narrowness of our notions—sets the horizon of our care. Understanding which notions are most fundamental and which ones are derivative can help us to tackle issues fairly and with balance.

So we should ask: What basic contribution can religious communities make to the language of migration?

To be faithful to the shift in consciousness that I called “religious bi-lingualism,” I would have to point out that each community—Buddhist, Shinto, Christian, Islamic, Hindu, etc.—needs to develop its own understanding of the challenges of migration in its own specific religious terms. Happily, there is some good work underway in this area.

Nevertheless, today we also need public multi-religious notions that can help express the depth of the shared concerns of diverse religious communities for immigrants. Hopefully these notions can enrich the deliberations of all stakeholders.

There are two such notions that I believe can have decisive importance for immigration. They are: 1) “human dignity” and 2) “shared security.”

The importance of these basic notions comes out when we focus on recent efforts to refine the categories of immigrants. Terms like “*refugee*,” “*migrant*,” “*forced migrant*,” “*immigrant*,” “*undocumented*,” “*internally displaced person*” and “*alien*” are some of the most common terms one can find in the literature.

Linking these terms with relevant legal codes is extremely important. So, I want to note my appreciation for the value of the specialized vocabulary related to the diverse populations in migration, especially a term like “refugee” that is defined in the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

Nevertheless, these specialized terms are inherently limited. They are simply not adequate to the human reality of the people who are migrants. They all too often place the people being categorized in unequal relations with those whose are receiving them. They leave unexpressed critically important dimensions of human existence.

To complement—not replace—these specialized terms, let’s think of the notion “human dignity.” It is a basic notion that multi-religious groups are increasingly using when they speak of the ultimate worth of human existence. These multi-religious groups recognize that each diverse religious tradition has its own way of

anchoring the dignity of every person in its own experience of the Sacred. This dignity is inalienable; you cannot be separated from it. It is not given by religions, cultures, states, societies, communities or individuals. So, it cannot be taken away by them. Moreover, religious groups recognize that this dignity must be “restored” whenever it is violated.

In short, knowing that a person is a *refugee, migrant, forced migrant, immigrant, undocumented, internally displaced person or alien* is an enormously important detail, and we need these detailed categories. But, a person’s most basic identity is their inalienable dignity. Human dignity includes but is also more basic than legal status. Being legal or illegal doesn’t change one’s human dignity. Being legal or illegal does change legal obligations, but it does not alter our religiously-rooted obligations to honor, protect and restore the dignity of others. When it comes to human dignity, there is no “in group” and no “out group.” All are equal due to a status that none earned, but which all are called to receive and respect.

Placing human dignity, and the obligation to “restore” it when it has been violated, at the center of our debates on immigration does not eliminate the need for other special—categories. But it does re-center the relative importance of those other categories and it makes it crystal clear that we have moral obligations to respect the human dignity of immigrants that go far beyond the letter of the law.

Kindly take a further step and ponder with me another basic notion: “*shared security*.” This notion was developed by over 800 religious leaders coming from 100 countries to Kyoto for the Eighth World Assembly of *Religions for Peace* (WCRP) in 2006.

Don’t let the word “shared security” puzzle you. What the religious leaders were after was a multi-religious statement of the positive characteristics of peace. Because they were also speaking to Heads of State, the religious leaders chose to express themselves through the notion of shared security.

The religious leaders focused on two factors that contribute to shared security, and each of these can help us to think through the challenges of migration.

First, they cast a spotlight on our “fundamental vulnerability” as finite beings. You and I are mortal, our time on earth is limited and in our most sober moments we know it. How am we to live this inherent vulnerability? Does my religious tradition warn me about mistaken attempts to secure myself by dominating or subjugating others? Does it warn me that these are blind alleys when it comes to awakening to my true identity as a person? Indeed, does my religious tradition

invite me to bear my vulnerability in trust and to find in it the grounds for compassion for the vulnerability of the other? The religious leaders across traditions were united in answering “yes” to these questions. One’s own vulnerability—if lived honestly—provides the ground for solidarity with the other’s vulnerability. This has profound relevance for building a culture that sees the other with honesty and compassion.

Second, the religious leaders pointed out that shared security must focus on our “inter-relatedness.” In the starkest of terms, my security (or well-being) depends on yours, and yours on mine. Many religions understand this inter-relatedness as a deep structure of reality itself. Thus, we should not be surprised that, today, no walls can be built high enough to protect ourselves from the needs of others. The other’s security—in practical terms—has to be my concern. We are, today, no safer than the most vulnerable among us. In purely practical terms, we know we've got to take care of one another. In religious terms, we have always known this. The profound truth of our inter-relatedness provides an extremely helpful framework for migration issues. They are—in a very real sense—us.

In short, concern for human dignity and shared security—notions rooted in their own ways in each religion—are admittedly broad. They are not a substitute for the specific categories we need to respond to migration. But, they can provide a horizon of meaning and value that can help us to welcome the fundamental human relationship between migrants and their receiving communities.

May I suggest that the religious groups work together with all people of good will to help frame our discussions on migration in terms of the growing consensus on human dignity and something like shared security? People are “more” than legal personalities, and while we should endlessly strive to improve and implement our laws as they relate to immigration, the notions of human dignity and shared security make it clear that we risk our humanity if we ignore and “turn our back” on the other.

### III. A Method to Unleash Religious “Assets” for Immigration

Allow me finally to make a few comments on a method for unleashing religious assets to help tackle the challenges linked to immigration. Let me identify four simple steps.

First, **placing the challenge at the center of the table**. We need a true multi-stakeholder analysis of the challenges that attend the multi-faceted reality of immigration. In this, we are all reliant on UNHCR. It has the mandate to take the lead on this for all of us. Then, building on its work, we—all of us including the religious communities—can add texture and detail to the analysis of the challenges related to immigration.

Second, **re-framing key challenges in terms of related roles**. Do we need more **advocacy**? If so, who needs to be advocated? And, for what purposes... better laws, larger budgets? Do we need more **education**? If so, who needs to be educated and about what? For example, do we need better legal codes? If so, which ones: local, national or international? Do we need more **human services**? If so, who needs what?

Basically, what I am driving at is that “key challenges” need to be translated into “needed roles.”

Third, **re-inventorying religious assets for the ways they can help fill needed roles**. This is a highly creative undertaking. Basically, religious communities are invited to re-examine themselves through the lens of needed roles. The basic question is “what capacities or assets do we have for any of these roles? The examination can take place in terms of three potential classes of assets: spiritualities, moral heritages and extensive social networks. Using needed roles as lenses to re-inventory one’s religious heritage usually discloses large, often hidden or under-utilized capacities for action that lie within the reach of religious communities.

For example, if one is a Buddhist, how can the habits of cultivating the Bodhisattva mind serve as an asset for engaging immigrants? How can a Buddhist ethics of unrestricted compassion serve as an “asset” for addressing challenges related to immigrants? And finally, how can the vast network of Buddhist temples—including senior most religious leaders down to local temples—serve as a base for fulfilling some of the roles identified as essential to tackle?

These same questions are relevant to each religious community.

Importantly, using roles to identify assets can be advanced in multi-religious contexts. Then the relevant question “what kind of “gift” can my community make to help fill the roles we all agree are essential to addressing questions of migration.

Fourth, **mobilizing religious assets**. Concrete programs and projects need to be developed that include the work of mobilizing religious assets. Usually this requires an appropriate multi-religious body to push this work along. It's a creative process and we need to invest in it.

Can this approach work?

My answer is simple: Yes. Yes, it can.

It requires creativity and hard work, but I have seen it make the vital differences in challenges as diverse as conflict resolution and addressing the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Inevitably, it works best when cooperation among the religious communities provides a base for even broader multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Conclusion

Japan has played an irreplaceable role in helping to advance the religious bi-lingualism that is essential for multi-religious collaboration. Japan has helped us develop the multi-religious categories "human dignity" and "shared security." And finally, Japan has helped to pioneer around the world the simple but creative method for multi-religious action I have just noted.

Using this legacy to tackle immigration issues here in Japan will surely honor the human dignity and shared security of those who were born here, as well as those fortunate enough to find their way here.

Thank you for your kind attention.