

As delivered

High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges

Theme: Faith and Protection

**Opening remarks by Mr. António Guterres,
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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to Geneva for this year's Dialogue on Protection Challenges. Previous Dialogues – on asylum and migration, protracted refugee situations, urban refugees, and protection gaps and responses – centred on some of the emerging protection challenges in today's world and explored their operational implications. This year, we have instead chosen to take a moment to reflect on some of the values and principles in the world's different religions that underpin the notion of protection, and which unite us and our partners in our action on behalf of asylum-seekers, refugees, internally displaced and stateless people.

Our choice of this topic was inspired by discussions at last year's Annual UNHCR-NGO Consultations, when partners encouraged us to look at the role faith plays in protection work, and at ways in which a more strategic engagement with faith-based organisations and religious communities could contribute to improving protection for our people of concern.

UNHCR also organized, together with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and the Government of Turkmenistan, a Ministerial Conference on Refugees in the Muslim World earlier this year, which provided a valuable opportunity to explore some of the links between Islam's laws and precepts and international refugee law.

I am therefore very pleased that this Dialogue gives us the opportunity to build upon these interesting and fruitful discussions and widen them to a broader range of faiths and actors. At this morning's preparatory meeting with religious leaders, experts and representatives of faith-based NGOs, I was struck by the many examples of the consonance of key precepts and core values between the different faiths which participants identified, particularly as they relate to our humanitarian work. It is my hope that our conversations over the next two days will continue in this spirit.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Faith lives in the heart and mind of every individual and represents the deeply personal way in which each one of us relates with the transcendental dimension of our lives. I would therefore like to start with my own personal testimony about the connection between faith and humanitarian work.

When I was in high school, my dream was to become a researcher in physics. Upon entering university, I joined an organisation of Catholic students that ran a number of education and community service projects in the slums of Lisbon. I felt gratified by the work we were doing to help the needy, but at the time Portugal was a dictatorship, oppressing not only its own citizens but also the people of its African colonies. I soon realized that although the humanitarian work we were doing was valuable, it was not enough for me.

And so I left behind my dream to become a physicist and passionately embraced politics, seizing the enormous opportunity that the Portuguese Carnation Revolution of 1974 afforded to my generation. I was young and, like most young people, I felt a strong drive not only to help others, but also to try to change the world.

But then, as time went by, I found that there were limits to what one could do in politics, and that the rapidly changing world was not so easy to steer or tame. That led me to rediscover the full value of humanitarian work. And so, as soon as I left government, I restarted my voluntary activities; teaching mathematics to immigrants in a Catholic parish in the outskirts of Lisbon.

I have always considered the Parable of the Talents, one of the well-known parables of Jesus, to be of central guidance in my life. It teaches us that the talents with which we are endowed and the privileges we enjoy impose the duty to use them well in the service of others. The significance of our existence will be measured against our ability to account for the good we have done with what was given to us.

In this context, it made perfect sense for me to present myself as a candidate for my current job as High Commissioner, and to try to bring to bear all my capacities and the experience gained through my previous work to the service of the world's most vulnerable people.

But of course UNHCR is not a faith-based organisation. Yet when I came here, I soon discovered in its work exactly the same principles that are enshrined in my own beliefs. And I also realized that the values

of caring for those in need were equally shared by all major religions. This is of fundamental importance for refugee protection.

All major faiths share common concepts that relate to protected *places* on the one hand, and to protected *people* on the other. The ancient Greek word “asylon” – or sanctuary – was a designated space in each city, often a temple or other sacred place, from which nothing could be taken and in which no one could be violated.

This concept is mirrored in the “cities of refuge” mentioned in the ancient Jewish scriptures, and in the passages of the Holy Qur’an and the Hadith that designate mosques and other holy places as ‘safe’ locations.

Flight from persecution and the search for a protected place are shared narratives of the three Abrahamic faiths. The Exodus of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt is a central story of the Jewish faith. In Christianity, the Holy Family’s flight from Bethlehem is studied by all children in catechism. And for Muslims, the Islamic calendar begins with the year the Prophet (PBUH) travelled to Medina to seek protection when he and his followers had come under threat in Mecca. Similarly, Hindu mythology and Buddhist teachings and history include many stories of people finding safety in another location after having escaped mistreatment and discrimination.

The notion of the stranger who must be given protection is famously inscribed in many major religious texts. In the Torah, the book of Leviticus contains one of the most prominent tenets of the Jewish faith: “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Leviticus 19:33-34) Jewish law also states that it is prohibited to surrender any innocent person if that is likely to put their life at risk. This is very similar to the principle of *non-refoulement*, one of the cornerstones of modern refugee law.

The Gospel repeats the same idea several times through one of the two fundamental commandments of Christianity: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-38). This exhortation to welcome and care for the stranger, as well as for other vulnerable persons such as widows and orphans, is an integral part of Christian identity, and deeply anchored in the mission of Christian charity organisations.

In Islam, the Holy Qur’an calls for the protection of the asylum-seeker (*Al-mustamin*), whose safety is irrevocably guaranteed under the institution of *Aman*. This generous treatment is the same for Muslims and non-Muslims, as set out in the Surat Al-Tawbah: “And if anyone of the disbelievers seeks your protection then grant him protection so that he may hear the word of Allah, and then escort him to where he will be secure. That is because they are a people who do not know.” (Surah 9:6) Indeed, one measure of a community’s moral duty and ethical behavior is how it responds to calls for asylum. The extradition of “Al-mustamin” is explicitly prohibited – another ancient source for the modern protection notion of *non-refoulement*.

In the Hindu Upanishads, the mantra “atithi devo bhava” or “the guest is God” expresses the fundamental importance of hospitality in Hindu culture. Providing food and shelter to a needy stranger was a traditional duty of the householder. More broadly, the concept of *Dharma* embodies the task to do one’s duty, including an obligation to the community, which should be carried out respecting values such as

non-violence and selfless service. *Seva*, or service, is the path to purification and liberation, and a means of expressing an individual's spirituality, which reflects the central role charity plays in Hinduism.

In Buddhism, the Pali canon, or Tripitaka, highlights the importance of cultivating four states of mind: "Metta" (loving kindness), "Muditha" (sympathetic joy), "Upekkha" (equanimity) and "Karuna" (compassion). There are many different traditions of Buddhism, but the concept of "Karuna" is a fundamental tenet in all of them. It embodies the qualities of tolerance, non-discrimination, inclusion and empathy for the suffering of others, mirroring the central role which compassion plays in other religions.

To summarize, all major religious value systems embrace humanity, caring and respect, and the tradition of granting protection to those in danger. The principles of modern refugee law have their oldest roots in these ancient texts and traditions.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me now turn to the role which faith plays for those who need and receive protection – our persons of concern. Since coming to UNHCR, I have visited refugees and internally displaced persons in dozens of countries. Listening to their stories and witnessing their daily struggle in exile or displacement, I quickly understood that, for the vast majority of uprooted people, there are few things as powerful as their faith in helping them cope with fear, loss, separation, and destitution. Faith is also central to hope and resilience.

Religion very often is key in enabling refugees to overcome their trauma, to make sense of their loss and to rebuild their lives from nothing. Worship and religious traditions help uprooted people reconfirm their identity as individuals and as members of a community. Faith provides a form of personal and collective support among victims that is crucial for their ability to recover from conflict and flight. As such, faith contributes much more than many people think to the protection and well-being of refugees and other persons of concern to UNHCR and eventually to finding durable solutions.

For all of these reasons, it is essential that refugees' religious freedom is fully guaranteed, both by the countries and communities receiving them, and by the humanitarian agencies assisting them. The respect and concern for strangers, even if they are of another faith than one's own, is a common value across religions. Humanitarian organisations, both faith-based and secular, must ensure their programmes take into account the centrality of faith, and of religious freedom, to the protection and well-being of the displaced. And similarly, they must ensure their staff have the knowledge and training required for dealing with protection concerns linked to the exercise of religious freedom.

Ultimately, this also means that religious beliefs must not be allowed to become a ground for persecution and a source of displacement. The shared values common to different religious traditions present a strong framework for promoting tolerance and openness towards people of other faiths.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

In all of our previous Dialogues on Protection Challenges, one theme emerged over and over again as being integral to UNHCR's ability to deliver upon its Mandate. That was partnership. It should therefore come as no surprise to you that we have also made it a central focus of this year's Dialogue.

We have been working for decades with faith-based humanitarian organisations, some of which are much older than UNHCR. Local religious communities and faith leaders also play a central role in most humanitarian crises where we operate.

Nonetheless, UNHCR has for many years tended to view these partners with the same lens as the secular-based organisations it works with. This approach, while rooted in the requirement for the organisation to act neutrally in accordance with humanitarian principles, has sometimes prevented us from considering the full potential of these organisations in helping us to address protection challenges in ways that complement our own secular approach. For one, they are better placed to address the spiritual needs of communities affected by conflict, disaster and displacement. Even more importantly, in most circumstances local religious communities are the first which our people of concern turn to for protection, assistance and counselling. Faith-based organisations often enjoy higher levels of trust from the community, better access and broader local knowledge, all of which are important assets in programme design and delivery, including in complex and insecure environments.

Having said that, working with faith-based humanitarian organisations is not without its challenges. These include working in multi-religious humanitarian settings, where displaced communities belong to different religious groups. Faith-based organisations often face negative perceptions or at least a certain level of disquiet from some of their partners, who struggle with the perceived risk of such organisations using the assistance they provide to try to convert their beneficiaries.

It is therefore key that partnerships respect the core principles of humanitarian work – impartiality and non-discrimination, equality and the protection against any kind of conditionality. These are central to the work of both faith-based and secular humanitarian organisations.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

In closing, let me set out some of the things I hope this Dialogue will help us achieve.

Firstly, faith-based organisations and local religious institutions can help create and strengthen welcoming communities for refugees and other persons of concern to UNHCR. In anxious times such as the one we are living in today, foreigners and migrants face negative attitudes in many places around the world, which diminishes the protection space available to refugees and asylum-seekers. Racism, xenophobia and religious intolerance undermine the universal values of tolerance and respect for human dignity. Faith-based organisations and religious leaders can play an immensely positive role in countering such

sentiments and building tolerant and inclusive communities, based on the common values of caring and respect for the stranger.

Second, I see faith-based organisations, and in particular local religious communities, as having great potential to more effectively contribute to the achievement of durable solutions. The search for lasting solutions for refugees remains one of the greatest protection challenges we are faced with, in particular in recent years.

A multiplication of new conflicts, coupled with the fact that so many old crises do not seem to get resolved, has meant that more people have become displaced and fewer and fewer have been able to return home in safety. As a result, the number of refugees in protracted exile has been growing steadily over the past decade, and there are currently more than 7 million people under UNHCR's mandate – not counting the Palestinians under UNRWA's mandate – who have been refugees for five years or more. Some of them have been in exile for decades, with entire generations born in refugee camps, and lacking prospects for their future.

The primary responsibility for creating conditions that are conducive to finding durable solutions lies with States. But faith-based organisations have an important role to play in promoting reconciliation and peaceful coexistence – in the country of origin after a conflict, during refugees' stay in exile, and upon the return of the displaced, facilitating the reintegration into their home communities. The potential of inter-faith responses by agencies of different religious linkages is an important one to be explored in this regard.

Third, I hope that our discussions here will lead to truly enhanced partnership, not only between UNHCR and faith-based actors, but also among these organisations themselves, including those of different creeds. I am convinced that there is a wealth of good practices and practical ideas to be discussed which we can turn into concrete ways of working together to improve protection for refugees and other people of concern.

On a more general level, it is my hope to see a stronger interreligious dialogue related to refugee protection emerge from this meeting. The different faiths represented here today cover more than three-quarters of the world's population. Their shared values and traditions, and the importance all of them place on some of the key concepts of protection, are not only strong advocacy tools but also a good basis for strengthening interfaith cooperation and dialogue.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I thank you very much for your attention and look forward to engaged and inspiring discussions.