

*Comments by CIU co-Chairman, S.A. Ibrahim about the shared values of religions and the consequences of religious intolerance in his talk May 5, 2022 during the Dallas Inter-religious Week of Faith.*

Salam, Shalom, Namaste, Sat Sri Akal and Greetings to all of you. Thank you for the kind introduction and my sincere thanks for being given this opportunity to share some thoughts with you as a lay person, who wandered into exploring my faith and reconnecting with religion some years ago and found myself trying to draw together people of different faiths by focusing on the common good we all share. Good that is often obscured by the loud clutter of distorted messages falsely promoting hate and violence in the name of faith.

I will start off by asking for blessings from the ONE Almighty — an Almighty we all worship but call by different names, an Almighty whose mercy and benevolence, indeed know no bounds.

I was born into a Sunni Muslim small business family, in Hyderabad, India — a family led by my grandfather and father, simple men, devout in following their religion yet kind and friendly towards the people of different faiths in whose midst we lived and prospered.

In addition to Muslims like us as well as different from us, there were Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Zoroastrians, Jains and others including secularists claiming no particular faith. From my family I learned to accept and appreciate these people, feeling so secure in our own faith and identity that we enthusiastically joined in their holidays and celebrations without feeling diminished in being true to our own faith.

As I grew up and came to the United States as a college student, I distanced myself from all faiths, seeing only the negative messages from those inside and outside, exploiting and distorting religion to promote their evil agendas. Like many in my generation, at that time, particularly those attending elite universities I thought that faith was not for me but for the intellectually weak and gullible.

Then, speaking of crises, 9-11 happened. At that time, I was managing a San Francisco based business of a New York bank. I happened to be in Manhattan for my parent company's Board meeting on that dark day when the younger son of my boss, the CEO, became a 9-11 casualty in the World Trade Center tower.

I saw the worst of what could be done in the name of religion in the actions of the few professing my own faith, engaging in acts of savage destruction — actions that seemed so alien and unrecognizable when compared to the kindness and compassion towards all I had seen in my family and in the other Muslims I knew.

I also saw the worst that could be done in a crisis in those, including some religious leaders, who seized on the day as an opportunity to engage in indiscriminately and incorrectly paint my entire religion and all its billion plus followers guilty by association.

I saw the best that could be done at a time of crisis in the name of religion, as a devout and proud Christian Methodist President of the United States, now living in Dallas, advocated unity and understanding, and demonstrated the vision and courage to visit a mosque in Washington to loudly assert the peaceful messages in my faith to a shocked nation.

I saw the best in religion in the voices of religious leaders from mine and other faiths, condemning the horrible actions and those responsible while drawing attention to the many good people who ought not be held responsible, and to a religion that did not deserve to be tarnished by the actions of a misguided few.

Most directly and personally it was my then boss, the man who lost his son on 9-11, a devout Roman Catholic, who, in spite of having suffered a huge personal loss, consoled me as I was devastated by what had been done in the name of my religion by people so different from me. It was at the urging of this boss and mentor of mine, that I felt the powerful drive to reconnect with my religion, discover for myself the positive teachings in mine and other religions and lend my small voice in leveraging the common good we all share to bring us together as a force of peace and mutual understanding:

Together in trying to unite this divided world.

Together in trying to heal this hurting world.

Together in trying to repair this broken world of ours.

And, together in proclaiming a joint message of hope in fighting despair; kindness in fighting cruelty; and love in fighting hate.

It was the crisis of 9-11 and the discovery of some of the following messages that made me renew my faith in religion and discover the beautiful and powerful guidance we share:

Judaism teaches us Tikum Olam and urges us to repair the world and also teaches us to be kind to strangers because we were once a stranger ourselves.

Christianity teaches us a powerful message of love towards others — a message I learned attending Christian missionary schools and a message that still resonates in my mind with the name of Jesus.

There are so many mentions of kindness, mercy and compassion in Islam starting with the words of the invocation that begin every prayer and every talk — words

I used earlier in asking the blessings of the Almighty. Even though justice and fairness rank so high above everything else in Islam, mercy and forgiveness rank even higher.

Hinduism, in the beautiful and deeply profound message from the Celestial Song, the Bhagvad Gita, calls on us to remain level-headed and devote ourselves to our duty at a time of crisis. Indeed, I used to remind myself of my Dharma when I faced my biggest business challenge as the CEO of a company that found itself at the gates of Hell during the depths of the financial downturn in 2008.

Sikhism teaches us the value of service in good and bad times everywhere people are hurting and in need, following the teachings of its great Gurus and words from the Granth Sahib.

Paramount in Zoroastrianism is the benevolence of Ahura Mazda and so it is no accident that shrinking numbers notwithstanding, Parsi names still shine among charitable institutions in Mumbai.

And, similar messages are found in other faiths.

So, my friends, as I end my comments, I wish us great success in creating unified messages of comfort, caring and compassion in a world that appears to be endlessly reeling from one crisis to another.

I beseech the Almighty to shower us with mercy and benevolence so that the evil few among us do not succeed in inflicting pain and suffering upon the many decent and powerless among us.

Most of all I pray that we, the sons of Adam and the descendants of Cain and Abel, get the visibility into seeing our own evil side and the wisdom to overcome it, so that we do not let our fear of others, and our present or past victimhood to dehumanize and persecute our brothers and sisters because they or someone else once did or are doing horrible things to us today.

The worst crisis is the crisis that each of us is capable of unleashing ourselves, by letting our bad side with its urge for blind vengeance win over our good side and its urge for kindness.

I call upon our true commitment to the best teachings of our faiths to save us from ourselves.

May the Almighty guide the speakers who follow me by providing them the guidance to share their wisdom about using our faiths to comfort us through future crises, correct the misunderstandings and distorted views of each other that divide us and pray for God's peace and blessing upon all His creation.

Ameen!