



G20 Religion Forum (R20) Plenary Session 5:

What values do we need to develop to ensure peaceful co-existence?

“I believe that we can readily identify shared civilization-building ethical norms... that work against a clash of civilizations in the same way as the right medicine from our doctors can effectively counteract disease in our bodies.”

~ Rev. Professor Thomas K. Johnson

BALI, Indonesia, 3 November 2022 — The fifth plenary session of the R20 Summit featured a diverse array of religious leaders, scholars, and activists who discussed “the importance of developing a global consensus regarding shared values that the world’s diverse cultures will need to embrace if they are to co-exist peacefully” (R20 Founding Chairman KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf).

Speakers addressed a wide range of topics, including the need to bring moral and spiritual values to bear in institutional and governmental decision making; the threat to human dignity and freedom posed by artificial intelligence; the resurgence of tribalism worldwide; and the 2020 report of the US Department of State’s Commission on Unalienable Rights.

The speakers in Plenary Session 5 included:

- Moderator: Dr. Timothy Samuel Shah, co-founder and Director of Strategic Initiatives, Center for Shared Civilizational Values (USA/India);
- Rev. Dr. Thomas K. Johnson, Senior Theological Advisor, World Evangelical Alliance (USA): *“[A Clash of Civilizations or Shared Civilization-Building Values: We Must Decide](#)”*;
- Most Venerable Kotapitiye Rahula Thera, University of Peradeniya (Sri Lanka): *“Pancasila as a Key to Establishing Morality in Public Life”*;
- Dr. Peter Berkowitz, Hoover Institution, Stanford University (USA): *“[The Search for Universal Values Amidst a Resurgence of Tribalism](#)”*;
- Dr. Marcela Szymanski, Aid to the Church in Need International (Mexico): *“Bringing Moral and Spiritual Values to Bear in Institutional and Governmental Decision-making”*; and
- Rev. Dr. Paolo Benanti, T.O.R., Professor, Pontifical Gregorian University (Italy): *“[Algoethics: The Timeless Values of Religion and Their Irreplaceable Contribution to the Humane and Peaceful Development of Artificial Intelligence](#)”*

The session began with introductory remarks by Dr. Timothy Samuel Shah, Director of Strategic Initiatives for the Center for Shared Civilizational Values. Echoing Mr. Staquf’s remarks from the previous day, Dr. Shah observed that one consequence of accelerating globalization “is that the entire human family is, in effect, becoming a ‘single household’ inhabiting a shared dwelling place. In order to get along we need to establish new values based upon timeless principles, including truth, justice, and compassion, just as those entering a marriage need to embrace new values and attitudes if their union — and the household they seek to establish — is to flourish.”

Dr. Shah pointed to the post-World War II rules-based international order as an inspiring example of how the world’s diverse peoples and cultures were able to embrace, albeit imperfectly, new shared values for the sake of peaceful co-existence and a more just and humane future. Determined to prevent the repetition of catastrophic global war and genocidal crimes against humanity, the world community succeeded in elevating two new values that had never before been the foundational principles of a comprehensive international system — i.e., national sovereignty and human dignity — and positioned these values as fundamental to the United Nations Charter (1945) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).

“Given the current challenges posed by globalization, new technologies, and a resurgence of identity-based conflict,” observed Dr. Shah, “there is an urgent need to broaden and deepen the base of support for a rules-based international order, by identifying and embracing new shared values that will foster peaceful co-existence and, at the same time, reflect the rich diversity of the world’s many religions, cultures, and civilizations.”

Following Dr. Shah’s introductory remarks, the first panel speaker was Reverend Dr. Thomas K. Johnson — Special Envoy to the Vatican and Special Envoy for Engaging Humanitarian Islam at the World Evangelical Alliance, which represents over 600 million Protestants in 143 countries world-wide. A widely published author on theology, ethics, and human rights, Professor Johnson delivered an address titled “A Clash of Civilizations or Shared Civilization-Building Values: We Must Decide.”

In his speech, abridged and edited for publication, Dr. Johnson observed that:

We can readily identify shared civilization-building ethical norms among our several religions — shared ethical standards that work against a clash of civilizations in the same way as the right medicine from our doctors can effectively counteract disease in our bodies.

I propose that we think in terms of a shared table for the articulation of civilization-building ethical values, as a way to overcome the disease of a clash of civilizations. We can think in terms of four legs supporting a table of shared moral values:

The first leg of the table of values: the universal law of humanity — *When we feel guilt, or when we claim someone has done something wrong, we are referencing an unwritten standard, a law above the laws of our society, or a norm that should inform all cultures. Within Christianity, we have traditionally called this the “natural moral*

law.” *In our multi-religious societies, we might call it the universal moral law or the law of humanity. This law is not hundreds of pages long. In fact, it can be summed up in a few potentially world-changing sentences: “Do good and avoid evil. Do unto others as you would have them do to you. Love your neighbor as yourself. Do not murder. Do not steal.” I call these central precepts the guardians of our humanity. We all know them, regardless of our religion or culture.*

The second leg: respect for human dignity — *As a Christian, I believe that human dignity is a gift from God, given to all people. This dignity is what makes religions possible, since, as far as I know, only humans practice religion. We sense this human dignity when we talk with other people, no matter how different from us they may be.... In our time, discussions of human rights have often been politicized by various parties and regimes, but this politicizing is possible only because human dignity is real. We all recognize this dignity in ourselves and in other people.*

The third leg: protecting foundational human goods — *Scholars of our multiple religions have identified basic human goods that civilizations must value and preserve in order to flourish. For example, the Sunni Muslim jurists Imam al-Ghazali (1058 – 1111) and Imam al-Shatibi (1320 – 1388) described five basic human goods — faith, life, progeny, reason, and property — that should be protected by ethical norms and civil laws. They were, I believe, interacting with the Christian philosopher Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274), who described the five foundational goods as life, procreation, social life, knowledge, and rational conduct. The words are slightly different, but the two lists are virtually identical in content. These foundations of life are fragile in a way in which the law of gravity is not fragile; they can be destroyed if we do not value and carefully protect them. Christians and Muslims are heirs to a mature understanding of foundational human goods in which others should join.*

The fourth leg: the practice of virtue, nobility of character, or the fruit of the Spirit — *To respect our neighbors, promote the law of humanity, and protect primary human goods, we need to be the right kind of people. Each person must transition from childish destructiveness toward becoming our best selves, practicing our God-given dignity. Within Christianity, we talk about putting on the fruit of the Spirit, exhibited by such qualities as love, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control. Some Muslims talk about developing “nobility of character.” Thoughtful people from many religious traditions describe an “ethic of virtue.” We must train ourselves to embody nobility of character and maturity of moral personality, and this must be a constant theme in our religious communities. If we fail, the alternative is the will to power and the devastation it brings....*

Today in Bali we are seated around a table, not only to enjoy hospitality, friendship, and beauty, but also to articulate civilization-building values. I will not be bothered if someone says, “Such a large table needs one or two more legs.” Nor will I be concerned if someone proposes to define one of the legs differently. Let the discussion continue! My central point is that independent of our diverse religious rituals and practices, which embody our very different ways of understanding the Ultimate, I believe we can readily envision gathering around a shared table to identify the most fundamental values on the basis of which our societies can truly flourish.

Furthermore, I believe we can work together to build and strengthen our understanding and embrace of these shared values, without treating our deep religious differences as insignificant or trying to reduce them to some lowest common denominator. The choice is ours. Will we remain divided and polarized, sitting in our separate corners, or, worse, will we choose the path of religious conflict and civilizational clash? Or will we gather together, as one human family, around a common table of shared civilizational values?

The entirety of Dr. Thomas K. Johnson’s address, “A Clash of Civilizations or Shared Civilization-Building Values: We Must Decide,” may be [read](#) and [viewed](#) online.

The Most Venerable Kotapitiye Rahula Thera — a leader of Sri Lanka’s Theravada Buddhist community and scholar at the University of Peradeniya — delivered an address titled “Pancasila as a Key to Establishing Morality in Public Life.” Noting that Indonesia’s founding fathers established a modern form of Pancasila as the official ideology of their newly independent, multi-religious and pluralistic nation state in 1945, the Most Venerable Rahula Thera affirmed that Pancasila and other core elements of Buddhist tradition embody universal values essential to the maintenance of just and harmonious societies.

In a speech titled “The Search for Universal Values Amidst a Resurgence of Tribalism,” Dr. Peter Berkowitz of Stanford University’s Hoover Institution emphasized the need to embrace universal values, as a counter to the extreme polarization that accompanies various forms of identity politics worldwide.

The reckless disparagement of universal principles and growing confusion about the reach of nationalism have widened the partisan divide within liberal democracies. Under the influence of both, fellow citizens incline to view one another as adversaries rather than partners in a common enterprise. Acrimonious discourse becomes a way of life. Tribalism — according to which one’s highest loyalty is to one’s social and political group — gains ground. This poses a mounting threat to that unity within diversity on which not only liberal democracy depends but also a world order that respects the sovereignty of nations and the universal rights of individuals.

Observations such as these impelled then-U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in the summer of 2019 to create the Commission on Unalienable Rights. The independent commission’s purpose was to reground America’s commitment to human rights in the nation’s founding principles, constitutional traditions, and the obligations that the country took on in 1948 by voting in the UN General Assembly to approve the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Harvard Law School Professor Mary Ann Glendon chaired the commission. I served as the commission’s executive secretary.

The commission operated in the spirit of Jacques Maritain, the eminent French Catholic philosopher. Maritain wrote the introduction to a 1948 UNESCO volume, Human Rights: Comments and Interpretations, which featured essays from around

the world. Maritain argued that it was possible to secure agreement across borders and cultures on a small set of human rights. But, he emphasized, it was to be expected that this agreement would be reached by a multiplicity of routes: peoples and nations would reason from within their own distinctive cultures and faiths to arrive at a common core of universal principles.

Let us, gathered here in Bali for the first annual G20 Religion Forum, carry forward the work of cultivating respect for human rights through teaching and education. Inspired not least by Indonesia's national motto of "Unity within Diversity," let us cherish our own traditions while reaching outward to the principles that reflect our shared humanity.

The entirety of Dr. Peter Berkowitz's address, "The Search for Universal Values Amidst a Resurgence of Tribalism," may be [read](#) and [viewed](#) online.

The next speaker, Dr. Marcela Szymanski of Mexico, articulated why, despite mounting global threats to human dignity and universal human rights, she remains hopeful and even joyful in advocating for shared moral and spiritual values. Dr. Szymanski is European Union and United Nations Advocacy Officer for Aid to the Church in Need International, a Pontifical Foundation dedicated to the service of Christians around the world through information, prayer, and action, wherever they are persecuted, oppressed, or suffering material need.

Her remarks were titled "Bringing Moral and Spiritual Values to Bear in Institutional and Governmental Decision-making."

Brothers and Sisters, I am extremely happy for the opportunity to consider together with you the question that I ask myself every day. Everybody can notice when moral and spiritual values are missing in public and private policy-making but, how to bring them back without infringing the individual fundamental rights of citizens? Is there a group that is right and another one wrong? Is there a country that is truly always on the side of angels? Of course not, but the environment presented to us through social media pushes us continuously to choose sides. Leaders are missing in action, and I realize that the responsibility is within my own conscience.

This conference bears witness to the often-neglected reality that the basis of religion — the human search for Truth and Transcendence — deserves global engagement. I cannot be thankful enough to the hosts of this R20 for uniting words and action.

The entirety of Dr. Marcela Szymanski's address may be [viewed](#) online.

The session concluded with an address delivered by the Rev. Dr. Paolo Benanti on the urgent need to develop and apply new ethical principles to the realm of technology, particularly artificial intelligence. A member of the Franciscan mendicant order of monks (Third Order Regular of St. Francis), Father Benanti teaches at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome,

and serves as advisor to Pope Francis on issues of artificial intelligence and technology ethics. Prof. Benanti is also Scientific Director of RenAIssance Foundation, which was established in 2021 as an integral part of the Pontifical Academy for Life, in order to support ethical reflection on new technologies.

Father Benanti's speech, excerpted below, was titled "Algoethics: The Timeless Values of Religion and Their Irreplaceable Contribution to the Humane and Peaceful Development of Artificial Intelligence."

We all know that science and technology play a major role in the profound transformations that the world is currently undergoing. Over the past few years, technology has gone through increasingly rapid cycles of development, producing more and more innovations. We have witnessed the digital transformation of technology; the emergence of "big data"; and an exponential increase in computational power.

But the innovation produced by artificial intelligence is not an unalloyed blessing. It also has many neutral and even sinister aspects which, if not harnessed and directed for the good of all humanity, may evolve to its profound detriment.

In fact, most people are unaware of the operational procedures of artificial intelligence. However, AI is pervasive and ever more present in countless fields, such as manufacturing, healthcare, education, nutrition, security, and other realms that shape our daily lives. In short, AI is everywhere; and thanks to its rising power, its role will continue to increase in the coming years.

We need to pay close attention to what is happening in this arena, because an enormously valuable tool created by the human intellect can turn out to be a valuable friend, making our lives easier; or it can become an instrument of oppression used to control, direct or otherwise influence humanity, especially weak, vulnerable and less educated members of society.

Let's try to ask ourselves: Do we really want machines to threaten our dignity, our right to live as free and conscious individuals, and the legitimate privacy of our personal lives? Do we really want all of us to be profiled unknowingly, and do we welcome the advent of a world in which algorithms make decisions based on ethnicity, gender, and age? Is there really no other solution than entrusting artificial intelligence with decisions on job offers, loans, or criminal proceedings? Do we really want to unconditionally trust a mechanism that can create "deepfakes," which are false but extremely realistic images, video and audio files that can swindle, ruin reputations, or undermine trust in democratic decision-making processes? Should we allow new technologies to threaten freedom of association or speech, as we look upon these developments with indifference?

Summing it all up in a single question: do we really want AI to undermine the foundations of peace and human dignity?

Wouldn't it be better to opt for an artificial intelligence that proves useful in managing complexity to everyone's benefit; that helps optimize resource management; that yields precious benefits in the fields of medicine and healthcare, and in the

performance of tasks that are too difficult or dangerous for human beings to undertake?

There are many people of good will, throughout the world, devoted to the welfare of humanity at large. I believe the R20 emerges from such an impulse, and view this gathering as an opportunity to initiate new dialogues among the diverse peoples, cultures, and religions of the world, founded upon mutual respect and shared values.

We know that religions play a crucial role in shaping societies where the Human Being stands at the center of development goals, both conceptually and practically. That is why we strongly believe that the development of artificial intelligence should proceed from a shared ethical perspective, which is essential to building global solidarity and peace....

Religion, by its very nature, aspires to peace. If it can open itself to engagement and dialogue, as all of you here today have done, it will find much common ground with those who desire change, and aspire to a future of shared peace.

Only by working together in pursuit of a common goal, participating in shared reflections, and identifying shared solutions, may we leverage our combined influence and thereby shape the development of artificial intelligence in such a way that it benefits our entire planet.

Technology has given us the opportunity to gather here, to enjoy each other's company, and enrich one another through dialogue and the exchange of ideas. Let us leverage the opportunity offered by the R20 as best as we can, so that productive avenues for dialogue and the emergence of a movement for peace and human dignity will multiply!

The entirety of Rev. Dr. Paolo Benanti's address, "[Algoethics: The Timeless Values of Religion and Their Irreplaceable Contribution to the Humane and Peaceful Development of Artificial Intelligence](#)," may be read online.

[View Plenary Session 5.](#)