



The Seventh Doha Interfaith Dialogue Conference
20-21 October 2009

Human Solidarity

“Religious Perspectives and Responses in the Face of Natural Disasters and Famines in the World”

Dr Nicholas J. Wood

Dean, Regent’s Park College, Oxford University
Free Church President, Christian Muslim Forum, England

* * *

I am grateful to the organizers of the conference for the invitation to address this distinguished gathering on such a significant theme. In a short paper it will only be possible to outline some of the possible perspectives and responses but I hope that this will be a stimulus to further reflection and discussion.

I shall make three main points under the headings of:

1. Religions and Mobilizing Human *Resources*
2. Religions and Enabling Human *Responses*
3. Religions and Resourcing Human *Reflection*

1. Religions and Mobilizing Human *Resources*

In the face of natural disaster often the immediate need is for practical response of various sorts. Religious communities are often well-placed to engage at this level. The overall theme of our conference, ‘Human Solidarity’, is a reminder that our religious beliefs and practice are often the underlying factors which create strong human communities and bind us together. All of our faiths are rooted in the communities and cultures in which they have developed so religious organizations generally have a strong presence ‘on the ground’ wherever disaster may strike.

In our various religious traditions this local presence will be expressed in different ways, since diverse faith communities have very different patterns of organization, but most will have local groups such as mosques, churches and gurdwaras, and many will also have regional, national and even international networks or institutions, all of which provide potential channels of communication and distribution for aid and relief in the early stages of response to disaster.

Religious communities can also mobilize spiritual resources to ensure that from the very early stages the victims of tragedy or disaster are treated with the appropriate dignity and respect which all of us would wish to accord people in recognition of our common humanity. This leads on to the second point I wish to make.

2. Religions and Enabling Human Responses

In the face of tragedy and disaster human beings clearly need immediate help and support in the form of such things as food, water and shelter. But they also have needs beyond these essential material requirements; they need appropriate spiritual sustenance. In the face of death and disaster people need to mourn and the rituals of our respective traditions in relation to death, dying and mourning are crucial aspects of this process. Death is always a liminal moment, a transition from one state of being to another, and religions have always offered liturgies and rituals through which human beings confront the reality of death and deal appropriately with the emotions we all feel at such times. Such rituals release the deceased into whatever form we believe any afterlife may take, and they release those who remain to continue with their lives in appropriate ways.

Where the encounter with death is on a large scale, as we might expect in the face of a natural disaster or tragedy, the needs will be magnified even beyond those which people experience in their more regular encounters with death. The priests, ministers, clergy and teachers of our traditions must be equipped to respond appropriately at such times in order that the comfort of our respective traditions may be brought in good time to those most in need.

Any encounter with suffering and death always poses significant questions about the meaning of life itself and this brings me to my final point.

3. Religions and Resourcing Human Reflection

One of the major questions which all our faith traditions seek to address is that of suffering and death. Each of our traditions will deal with this aspect of human experience in very different ways and through the centuries the various religions have often arrived at very different conclusions as to the answers we might give. As is well known the whole tradition we know as Buddhism was born in the encounter of the Buddha with the experience of suffering, death and dying. Very often the questions will focus on the apparently random nature of tragedy and disaster, as reflected for example in Rabbi Harold Kushner's well-known book *'When bad things happen to good people'*. Whatever we make of such attempts at response from within our various traditions it seems to me they reflect two common themes. The first is that as rational beings we are always trying to make sense of the world as we experience it; in such responses we are affirming our nature as rational beings and our belief that the world is capable of rational analysis, even when the answers remain elusive or provisional. Secondly they also frequently reflect our common convictions about the moral nature of our human experience – why do bad things happen to good people? They suggest that in our different ways we all affirm the moral nature of our existence and how best we might respond ethically in the face of tragedy and disaster.

Clearly these questions have been central to many of our traditions and the various attempts at answers are beyond the scope of such a short paper. But the

point is this: that our religions all in their own way offer a framework within which we may interpret the inevitable tragedies and disasters which human history suggests have always been our lot. Our traditions all offer possibilities for human reflection of the experiences of our joy and sorrows, our triumphs and our disasters. Therefore the religions provide an important resource for reflection on these profound existential questions which allow us to continue to live and to celebrate life, even in the face of death or disaster.