
Welcome and Introductory Remarks to the ICCGC and CoNGO Collaborative Conference

By **Liberato C. Bautista**¹

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Excellencies, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen. Good afternoon from New York. Wherever you are in the time zone, thank you for joining this collaborative conference co-organized by the Interfaith Coalition Conference for Global Citizenship (ICCGC) and the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CoNGO).

The Summit of the Future, to be convened in New York by the United Nations on September 22-23, 2024, aims to “forge a new international consensus on how we deliver a better present and safeguard the future.” Religions have a stake in that same future. Religions must contribute to the fulfillment of the lofty aims of the Summit. The stakes are high not to be concerned about the world, our future, and multilateralism itself—how it can meet and address the multifaceted challenges of global polycrisis we are beset with.

Welcome to this collaborative conference. You came to the right place where the active intersections of religion and international affairs will be laid bare, no longer as the international affairs considered by the British historian Arnold Toynbee in the 1940s as “a slum area” but as a well-developed human activity with religious actors engaging, in this instance, the multilateral agenda of the United Nations.

Religious, faith, spiritual, and ethical culture groups and their leaders, acting in their capacity as NGO leaders, have engaged and interacted with the UN and the multilateral system, a few from the birth of the UN in 1945 and increasingly since then, when the UN has granted consultative, associated, and observer statuses to nongovernmental organizations.

This conference is one such occasion when religious and faith actors claim the secular, indeed political sphere, as an arena in which they want to contribute insights and propose areas of action and collaboration to achieve international goals identified by the UN through multilateral negotiations.

CoNGO is not a religious NGO, but among its members, and most active, are religious, spiritual, and faith-based actors.

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This conference has always been held in Korea because Won Buddhism is the originator of the ICCGC. I have been associated with this conference. Won Buddhism, a CoNGO member, also created the Korean Organizing Committee for the UN International Day of Peace, whose annual meetings I have attended and addressed.

At the last ICCGC conference in Seoul, Korea, I suggested that the conference be held in New York, seizing the occasion to contribute to the thinking process leading to the Summit of the Future. That's why we are here. This is not the first ICCGC, but the first in New York and outside Korea. This conference continues its thrust to build global citizens from among religious actors, and for that matter, at this conference, for them to contribute to the imagination of the future, recognizing that religions—have a stake in a just, peaceable, inclusive, human rights-oriented, gender-just, and sustainable future.

This assertion comes with the knowledge that religions and their actors and institutions have been instrumentalized to justify historical injustices. We come to this meeting knowing that we cannot participate in the visioning of a future without each one of us and the institutions we represent acknowledging our complicities with these historic injustices.

Religions—including religious and faith actors, their institutions, and their symbols—are implicated in the historical injustices that are slavery, colonialism, and racism. Many ongoing wars and conflicts today have deep religious and cultural foundations. Interreligious and interfaith actors today must be challenged and mobilized to address the lingering expressions of these injustices. They must be bearers of the imperative agenda for a just, peaceable, inclusive, human rights-oriented, gender-just, and sustainable society.

I, for one, come to this conference and approach the Summit of the Future, recognizing that it is equally a Summit of the Past. The intractable crises resulting from historic injustices must be addressed to move forward into the future without them blocking the way.

The challenge is enormous. Our world today is awash in fear and deficient in hope. It will be challenging to envision a future with such a surplus of fear and a deficit of hope. Future generations deserve much better than what we, their elders, are bequeathing them.

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With this posture, religious, faith, and spiritual leaders may claim a stake today in developing and flourishing that future. As a representative at the UN for the last 27 years, as the main representative of the United Methodist Church worldwide at the United Nations, and as president of CoNGO for over nine years, I have seen the positive contributions of religious actors to the multilateral discourse and agenda.

As CoNGO president, you have heard me emphasize the importance of access for civil society, including religious and faith-based actors. I have described this as access to the premises, the promises of the UN, and the multilateral agenda. This conference is an effort on my part as CoNGO to encourage faith-based actors who are not traditionally engaged with the multilateral

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agenda to claim time and space in the multilateral discourse. And what more appropriate event than the Summit of the Future, where, together with the UN System, member states, and other institutions, we address the protection and flourishing of a shared future and destiny?

Multilateralism today must pay attention to two things: the lingering inequalities because of our historical past of slavery, colonialism, racism, and sexism. Today, the roots of these inequalities have perpetuated an uneven development of economies that make multilateralism's ambitions for sustainable development harder to accomplish.

There is an urgent need to identify and mobilize a diversity of religious, faith, and spiritual leaders who are conversant with their faith and religious traditions and willing to work together in interreligious and interfaith settings with a new set of skills and tools that equip them to participate in multifaith and multilateral platforms where visioning of that just, peaceable, inclusive human rights-oriented, and a sustainable society happens. These settings include the United Nations, especially as its Summit of the Future concludes. It forges a new set of multilateral tools to address global issues and prepare people and nations to realize them.

We need today to develop and train a new breed of thought leaders and action influencers with the ability to interface religious aspirations for a future of justice, peace, inclusion, sustainability, human rights, and ecological integrity with that future envisioned by multilateral negotiations such as the Summit of the Future and its related outcomes, including the Pact for the Future, Global Digital Compact, and the Declaration on Future Generations. In such a situation, our religious, faith, and spiritual institutions must identify, train, and equip leaders and animators for witness and advocacy in the public square.

Today, we need a deep sense of spirituality that religions—in their singularity and collectivity—can and must nurture. This spirituality deeply understands the past, is immersed and engaged in its practice in the present, and creatively participates in the imagination of the strategic future, if not the immediacy of tomorrow.

When continually enlarged in scope and application, the experience of security, peace, sustainability, and human rights fulfills and enhances humanity's well-being. When these become common and public, they truly become good, as in common public good.

Precepts that enlarge freedoms, secure rights, and sustain peace are at the core of religions. Enlarging freedoms, securing rights, and sustaining peace are the core of international law. In efforts to inscribe them in law and the hearts of men and women, norms and standards have evolved to constitute the precepts of global ethics and international justice.

The relations of nations, the welfare of humanity, and the security of institutions they found are sustainable at most when religions, cultures, and civilizations are just. We embody dignity, struggle for rights, and transact and negotiate our relations with each other—in family, community, and nations—with human responsibilities and state and multilateral obligations deeply embedded and influenced by religions and shared values.

The interreligious and interfaith community, in their wrestling with politics and economics, must articulate its understanding of not just sustainable development but of sustainable communities. Such understanding must prosper the requirement of “a just and moral economy where people are empowered to participate in decisions affecting their lives, where public and private institutions are held accountable for the social and environmental consequences of their

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operations, and where the Earth is nurtured rather than exploited, degraded, and plundered.”

The UN’s Agenda 2030 and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals are bold and transformative agendas that evoke religious, theological, moral, and ethical implications if not imperatives. But their full implementation is imperiled by the global challenges of financing development and the lack of political courage, even while the world’s peoples are welling up political will.

The Summit of the Future and its outcome documents provide another opportunity for the international community—governments, civil society, religions, and all—to imagine a just, peaceable, inclusive, human rights-oriented, gender-just, prosperous, and sustainable society.

This society must be fostered and undergirded by bold and transformative multilateralism and flourish in the interest of humanity and the planet. To make this happen, we need global citizens ready to develop and cultivate global civics whose primordial interest is the protection of everyone’s human dignity and the ecological integrity of our common habitation—the earth. To do this, we also must develop a personal attitude that prepares and cultivates the mind for self-reflection, critical thinking, and social engagement.

Education is fundamental to self-respect and community building. Global citizenship education fosters the learning that develops thinking and acting far broader than our immediate locales into a worldwide mindset that shows that addressing global issues is the way to address problems like climate change, massive and forced migration, global violence, and global health pandemics. We need a cadre of global citizens with an acute awareness of local and global realities to foster this kind of education.

A previous “interfaith dialogue for environment, unification of Korea and peacebuilding” stated, “For religion to contribute to peace, it is essential to create a culture of mutual respect and understanding through sustainable meetings and dialogue. Making peace means maintaining dialogue. Conversation is not only a means but a value in itself. Of all the conversations, spiritual-based conversations are the most fruitful ones. The goal is to move toward peace through dialogue. It takes true love to talk and spiritual growth of our minds to do that.”

All efforts at all levels of human existence, policy-making, and governance must ensure the crucial participation of youth and young adults. Education and future generations must be linked, as must intergenerational equity, justice, and accountability mechanisms. Emphasis must be given to children’s rights and active contribution to society, conscious of their unique needs crucial to a durable and sustainable future.

The global citizenry we must develop and mobilize is transborder in expanse and transnational in composition. It must be ready to defend human dignity and human rights on the ground, cultivate peace and a culture of peace in all locales, and invoke international law when humanitarian disasters and human rights violations occur. When such crises and violations occur, global citizens must be ready to call our attention to the shrinking public spaces for democratic discourse.

The public square must remain a platform for peoples of the world to express their deepest longings and their proposals for achieving a just, peaceable, democratic, inclusive, and sustainable world. That is how peace, democracy, and the rule of law thrive and thrive well.

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