“How can the values, norms and ethics of the different religions inspire action towards sustainable development?”

“Having heard this circle’s religious leader’s thoughts, values and actions, what can we personally do to support shared wellbeing, human dignity and the common good in our society?”
The Purpose of this session and core question of the Ethics in Action meeting 22 August 2017

In 2017, Alpbach welcomed Ethics in Action, an initiative that brings together a selected group of religious leaders, academics, civil society representatives, and practitioners to reflect on the moral and ethical dimensions of current social problems. Ethics in Action is a project organised by The Vatican, Columbia University in New York, Religions for Peace. They usually meet at the Vatican, and 2017 they met for the first time in Alpbach as a part of the European Forum Alpbach 2017.

In an evening session, one aspect of the meeting, “sustainable development”, was discussed with members of Ethics and Action. Together with participants, the senior religious leaders tried to identify the actions that religion(s) can take to support shared wellbeing, human dignity and the common good.

This session wanted to add value to the Forum participants as well as to the speakers and members of Ethics in Action by focusing on a dialogue and exchange by different religions together with the Forum Alpbach community.

The core questions guiding this set-up and design of the session were:

“How can the values, norms and ethics of the different religions inspire action towards sustainable development?”

And, “Having heard this circle’s religious leader’s thoughts, values and actions, what can we personally do to support shared wellbeing, human dignity and the common good in our society?”
Speakers

The Forum hosted 6 religious leaders from 6 major religions - Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Greek Orthodox and 180 other participants in a conversation on how the ethics and values of these religions may help in moving the sustainable development for our world forward and then an exploration in pairs on what each of us can wisely do about it.

- Emmanuel Adamakis: Metropolitan, Greek-Orthodox Chruch (Greek-Orthodox)
- Kosho Niwano: Reverend; President-designate, Rissho Kosei-kai (Nichiren-Buddhism)
- Anantanand Rambachan: Professor of Religion, Saint Olaf College, Indo-Trinidadian (Hinduism)
- David Rosen: Rabbi, American Jewish Community (Judaism)
- Marcelo Sanchez Sorondo: Bishop and Chancellor of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences (Catholic Church)
- Hamza Yusuf: Shaykh, President Zaytuna College, Berkeley (Islam)

Design of event

20.00-20.15 Welcome and framing by Verena Gruber, European Forum Alpbach, and Toke Moeller, Art of Hosting, moderator

The speakers were introduced and then they moved to their circles. Participants were invited to choose a circle. The following agenda was then followed in each circle:

20.20-20.45 Round 1
Speakers introduce themselves and reflect on the question: “From your religious tradition, what kind of values, norms and ethics can guide the world towards sustainable development?” A short round of questions were solicited from participants with the religious leaders responding to the questions to deepen the participants’ understanding.

20.45-21.10 Round 2
1) All participants are asked to explore the following question with their circle-neighbor: “Having heard this circle’s religious leader’s thoughts, values and actions, what can we personally do to support shared wellbeing, human dignity and the common good in our society?”
2) The pairs were then invited to share their thoughts and ideas.

The religious leaders were then gathered back on the stage.

21.15-21.30 Each speaker had a chance to summarize the outcomes of their circle to the entire audience: “What was the essence of what you have experienced in your circle?”

Moderator team

Phil Cass, USA, for Emmanuel Adamakis
Nina Nisar, DE, for Kosho Niwano
Nicola Crisp, UK, for Anantatand Rambachan
Laura Weisel, USA, for David Rosen
Philippe Narval, AUT, for Marcelo Sanchez Sorondo
Bronagh Gallagher, UK, for Hamza Yusuf
Thine Holm, DK, for Hamza Yusuf
Toke Moeller, Denmark, CEO of Interchange, co founder of the Art of Hosting practice
Harvest from the sessions

Emmanuel Adamakis, Greek-Orthodox Church

Notes from round 2:

• Daily personal practice: meditation, prayer, reflective time daily
• Practice changing my individual way of thinking
• Inviting conversations with my neighbors
• Invitation to clergy to join these conversations
• Train people to host meaningful conversations
• Shared wellbeing
• Mutual respect for one another (for their culture, their values, etc.)
• Appreciate nature, peace and value life
• Show empathy
• Love one another
• It is extremely important to focus on the long-term rather than on the short-term benefits. First, we have to change our daily habits:
  o Decrease consumption (of goods)
  o Save energy
  o Respect nature
• Increase awareness on global challenges:
  o Keep ourselves informed on what’s going on in the world
  o Share experiences, ideas, and best practice with other people/populations/countries
• Curiosity about other religions and being open for discussion
• Taking up initiative (start critical thinking, taking responsibility for our actions, etc.)
• Sharing our experiences
• Cooperation, solidarity and acceptance
• Tolerance => limited resource?
- Mobilization (inspiration?) => believing that one action can make a difference
- To listen open minded
- Care – act
- Tolerance/respect – non-judgemental
- Spiritual crisis: people feeling lost, decline of interest in religions
- Role of religion: help people to find themselves and to divinity -> lost value
  ➔ Need to recover that!
  ➔ Highest value -> teach that divine part is in me
- Acknowledging other opinions and feelings in non-judgemental way
- Think about your behavior, be introspective
- Do not be superficially tolerant, ask questions, build real understanding, however difficult
- Be flexible

**Kosho Niwano, Nichirin-Buddhism**

Niwano’s main message is that the crisis right now is an invitation to each of us to come back to an authentic sane human life. Knowing satisfaction is key to that life and to a sustainable way forward. Ms. Niwano stated that we’ll be able to move beyond fear and greed only if we know satisfaction deep down inside ourselves.

Her teachings further illuminate the Buddhist aspect of being in service, of giving without expecting, of being in service to life, and - connected to that - the recognition that I am nourished and sustained by all others, by all around, that humans are existing in relationships, interconnected. She puts a strong emphasis on action, on values, norms and ethics, on acting out into the world and making a difference.

Some of the threads in the sharing of the pairs were:
- Beginning with myself, taking it home, the inner change
- The importance of action, of showing up
- Mindfulness and being in the present moment to be a vessel of peace, love and kindness
Notes from round 2:

- Teaching 6-8 year old kids: respect yourself <-> respect your community and environment
- Meditation before action (work, conversation, e-mail....)
- Circle of influence <-> circle of concern
- Who decides what’s moral? Who am I to judge?
- Treat EVERYBODY with respect
- Do not feel superior
- Being satisfied with what you already have, and do not search all the time for more
- See that every person is special in his or her own way. We are all different and can learn things from each other
- Individual satisfaction is important for an individual
- Being an active part (e.g. in the community)
- Being consistent about the world’s interconnectivity and equality of (human) life
- We need pressure on politics and new forms of democracy
- Treat others as you want to be treated by others
- To learn from experiences of preceding centuries and humanity, take into account the peace and tradition
- Try to find equilibrium between yourself and surrounding environment
- Practice mindfulness
- Everything is interconnected
- Everyone is equal
- Keep it simple
- Being mindful, compassionate, selfless towards my community
- Adapt consumption patterns, given social environmental effects (= I only know satisfaction)
- Meditation classes in schools and kindergardens
- Culture of give AND give, not give and take
- Compassion is an important value

Anantanand Rambachan, Hinduism

Anantanand Rambachan opened with reference to a sacred text which captures the heart of the beliefs/values of the Hindu faith, translated as the Song of God, which include:
• Connection of all, people, life and things
• Inclusivity, common good for all, moral energy inspired by vision for the flourishing of all communities and all people
• Compassion and generosity
• Responsibility, we are all responsible for our choices: to look at the issues and what solutions we can create to overcome suffering (responsibility is not the freedom to control for our own purposes)

He also talked about a prayer which includes a wish for all that I know to be happy, for all that I know to be free from suffering. He talked more about happiness: as something that is more enduring than pleasure. Something that comes from “Lila” which refers to playfulness, being in the moment, the joy that comes rom interactions with each other, children + the happiness of being in service to others/giving/proving the value of others not self + being in connection to the divine.

In the dialogue with the group, one man summarised Anantanand’s reflections “if I heard you correctly, at the heart of your faith is the connection and importance of ALL, compassion, and the willingness to act to overcome suffering” others agreed these values were absolutely aligned to their own different faiths. Another group talked about the importance of how we raise children and instil important values in them…and how as children one was taught that God is in their heart (which rises up above “my God is better than your God”).

We were running a bit ahead of some of the other circles so after the group dialogue I asked if anyone else wanted to take a final opportunity to ask Anantanand anything and we had the question from the young woman about practices in religions, which go against these values/common good. He talked very honestly about the aspects of traditions that need to be looked at (dowry tradition, foetus’ aborted if they are a girl, opportunities and privileges afforded to men that are not open to women) and passionately about how we need to work to have more women in leadership position in religions if we are to have their voices heard and create change.

A powerful close, more so that it left a challenge for the religious leaders on the stage – and a good demonstration of leadership role modelling / taking personal responsibility – to do better within their own organisations as they seek to do better for all communities in partnership with organisations in the corporate world.

Notes from round 2:
• To be aware that really everything we do has an impact to everyone and everything!
• Trust and provide others with trust
• Tolerance
• We all believe in the same things in essence. The divisions are human-made
• Always try wholeheartedly to treat the people around you like you wish to be treated yourself by them. And respect the dignity of life
• Civil courage
• See, evaluate and act
• Happiness and joy in life
• Equality and compassion
• Practice of non-goal oriented activities
• Listening to our fellows emotions
• Not abuse animals and plants
• SDG’s Religion contradictive or complementary
• Care for the people around you. Religion gives space for that
• Compassion and kindness
• Feel responsible for your actions – they count
• Feel that you should care about every life form
• Gratitude and openness
Rabbi David Rosen opened his conversation by telling of the enormous negative impact that raising cattle has on polluting our environment, how the antibiotics and growth hormones administered to chickens have led to new medical challenges, and how our lack of planning for the future of our environment is already negatively effecting the earth. Today, we are confronted by real ethical issues involved in how we treat animals and what we are doing that effects our environment.

The Rabbi’s clear message was to:

- Choose ways of living that support a future in which you and your children may live by taking responsibility and stewardship of our planet so that the next generations can live.
- Responsible for sustainability is a paramount religious issue.
- The interconnectedness of personal freedom vs. responsibility for the common good is critical for everyone.

In Judaism, a blessing is said before we eat or drink to gratefully acknowledge the awareness that nothing is to be taken for granted. The Jewish value of keeping Kosher is designed as an act of mindfulness or consciousness and our ritual prays are a way of reminding use that we are not to take for granted what all that we have.

The Rabbi discussed how old Jewish traditions and beliefs were always being interpreted and adapted to modern times and that we should not rely on miracles. He was very clear that we as humans needed to understand that it is our effort and responsibility that counts. Every choice we make has an impact on sustainability.

“Religion gives meaning to who we are and how we live our lives.” By building conscious families and communities we model for our children the values of leading a sustainable life that has been a cornerstone in Judaism for generations. In our uncertain times, these traditions bring both comfort and wisdom to our families, guiding us to think about those in need, giving what we can in service of others, and working to consciously create the future we desire for our next generations.
Notes from round 2:

- Respect for one another and the resources we have – people of all faiths and those with no religious faiths still have an ethical responsibility to the future of Earth for the generations that will follow
- DO your own ‘inner work’ – walk the walk; talk the talk
- Promote our values in personal relationships and community conversations
- When I am changing...the rest of the system changes
- Serve as a good example in your family and in your community
- Work as volunteers to help others
- Reflect on your own behavior and consumption: Become a role model
- Spread your own sustainable practices with others – dialogue
- Build awareness – Stand up for Sustainability

Marcelo Sanchez Sorondo, Catholic Church

Notes not available.
Hamza Yusuf talked about how humility is an important and powerful message because a lot of what we see on our planet is human. Looking into the origin of the words human and humility in Greek points towards an understanding of us. Our bodies come from the soil of mother earth and our spirits are of the heavens. It is important to stay close to the earth; a Beduine once picked up a handful of earth and said: ‘This is your mother. Never distance yourself from her’. So I think that if we want sustainability we have to recognize who we are. In destroying the earth we destroy ourselves.

Notes from round 2:
- Do you think sharing religious thoughts with others, rather leads to conflict or cooperation?
- Finding inner freedom and accepting others’ inner freedom as well as their way of getting there
- Support each other – migration => refugees welcome
- Have a strong character – be satisfied with yourself
- Act environmentally friendly – buy local food, recycle
- If you want to change the world, begin with changing yourself!
  - Accept religious diversity
  - Educate truthfully
  - Become knowledgeable of religious diversity
- Be nice to others, accept other religions and opinions, educate others in critical thinking
- Possibility to choose religion after being educated about all religions, discuss different religious ideas in order to learn about different perspectives, ask questions to people who are well informed! Don’t only consume the media
- Live tolerance and exchange thoughts with people believing in diverse religions
- Mingle and discuss actively with people with different educational backgrounds
- Love for others what you love for yourself
- Mercy
- Tolerance
• Openness towards others
• Awareness and consciousness of your actions
• Actively participating in doing good
• Long term vision
• Move away from egoism, selfishness
• Good interpersonal relationships
• Don’t judge – non-judgemental, self-reflection
• Fight for empathy and patience
• Strive to do the right thing always – even in small things
• Be balanced, humble
• We let each other live peacefully and respect our personal choices. When we respect ourselves, our personality, our culture, and even religion we will be able to respect others.
• In a freedom system should be equal for everyone’s thought. We think we should give another chance to show the beauty of our religion because in all religions there is something beautiful
• It is not the humanity who makes problems it is the political system we live in.

Reflection question for us all

What are I and we, going to do about the practices in religions, which go against these values - human dignity and the common good?