

COMMENT | Human dignity: Towards building inclusive societies

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COMMENT | It gives me great pleasure to be at the Regional Southeast Asia Human Dignity Conference 2024 with the theme: “Dignity for Everyone Everywhere”.

I would like to begin by commending the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (Ikim) for hosting this important conference as well as the conference’s partners at the International Center for Law and Religion Studies of Brigham Young University.

Mention must also be made of the Religious Freedom Institute in Washington DC and the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies - yet more friends of Malaysia from around the world who have helped to make today’s conference possible.

The fact that I have acknowledged institutions from (practically) all four corners of the globe highlights just how collaborative and international this event is. This conference results from the combined efforts of individuals and teams representing a wide range of faiths and nationalities.

It is an event that, if you like, practises what it preaches enshrining international harmony cooperation and inclusivity in its very origins. This is vital if we are to spread a message about the importance of human dignity for everyone everywhere: and if we are to promote the building of inclusive societies.

We live in a world where sadly despite centuries of efforts from like-minded individuals inclusivity and religious freedom are not a given. Across the globe today people of different faiths and backgrounds are stripped of their human dignity because of their beliefs in large and small ways.

In some countries, certain religious groups are persecuted by governments forced out of their homes and even incarcerated because of their beliefs.

Even in parts of the world which purport to be inclusive minority populations often experience appalling everyday degradations - offensive graffiti on a wall near their home or an insult on their way into work because of something they wear or the colour of their skin.

We must work to eradicate every one of these acts of aggression from the macro to the micro because all of them, however small, represent an attack on human dignity itself.

Everybody, regardless of faith and background, deserves to feel safe respected

and included not only in their home country but wherever they travel. That to me is what this conference stands for: everyone everywhere.

Tolerance and inclusivity

Standing before you today, I am proud to reflect on Malaysia's own track record in this area. Tolerance and inclusivity are core values of our nation.

Ever since the declaration of the Rukun Negara in 1970 – a response to the dreadful race riots that blighted our young country the previous year - Malaysia has worked hard to promote the unity and togetherness of its diverse peoples and it is recognised internationally for this.

In 2008, the United Nations agency Unesco named George Town and Malacca as World Heritage Sites and lauded them as “exceptional examples of multicultural trading towns” commending their almost 500-year histories of intercultural dialogue and exchange.

We have in Malaysia as many as 137 living languages spoken by our citizens and we celebrate a wide range of religious festivals, including the Hari Raya Aidilfitri, Deepavali, Christmas, Chinese New Year, Wesak, Thaipusam, and many more Hari Rayas, always with enthusiasm and vibrancy.

Malaysia has indeed been hailed as a multicultural “success story” and I know I am by no means alone in the belief that our inclusivity - our celebration of diversity - is integral to our continued prosperity as a nation.

Indeed, as I have said before, and I repeat: “Malaysians of all races religions and geographic locations need to believe beyond a shadow of a doubt that they have a place under the Malaysian sun.”

Yet, sadly there are people here and around the world who do not share in that belief. Mistrust intolerance: this is a kind of pandemic which spreads like a virus between individuals communities and entire nations.

That is why events such as today’s are so important.

In the face of hate, we must spread messages of inclusion. In the face of ignorance, we must spread knowledge. And in the face of fear, we must spread love. Where some people are viewed as less worthy and less welcome because of their faith or the colour of their skin we must promote the message that all human lives are of equal value.

Here, I want first to reflect on the meaning of “human dignity for everyone everywhere” exploring theological and diplomatic perspectives on this notion.

Then I want to share some global success stories which might guide us towards

best practices in the areas of tolerance and inclusion.

I have always believed that when we are talking about humanity - about the value of difference and diversity - real human stories are so much more powerful than numbers and statistics. So, I am delighted that the sharing of such stories is a unique and important priority of this conference.

Our event's first objective is to "unpack best practices on how human dignity is actualised and contextualised in the lived realities within communities and society".

I hope to contribute a little to this discourse on lived realities today.

Human dignity

But first: What is human dignity? There are many different ways of answering this question drawing on religious philosophical and political concepts.

In Islam, human dignity is based on the Qur'anic concept of karāmah where God "ennobles" and "honours" human beings in the famous verse: "We have bestowed dignity to the children of Adam".

God gave Prophet Adam the gift of human dignity and this extends to the entire

family of Adam. In the language of the Abrahamic scriptures, it is the universal verse: “God created man in His image”.

We, thereby, have a God-given duty to honour God’s gift to us by affording human dignity to all other human beings. As an important Qur’anic verse declares, “O humankind! Indeed, We have created you from one male and one female and then We made you into different races and nations so that you might know one another.”

Muslims are enjoined to embrace the similarities that unite the whole of humanity: to understand in other words the essential nature of human dignity for everyone everywhere.

In the field of politics and diplomacy, the concept of human dignity has been enshrined in tracts and treatises from the United States Constitution in 1787 to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

However, a specific commitment to the protection of “Human Dignity for Everyone Everywhere” was not articulated until much more recently.

In 2018 in Punta del Este, Uruguay, a Declaration on Human Dignity for Everyone Everywhere was adopted to commemorate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 70 years previously.

The Punta del Este Declaration makes explicit a belief that has always been inherent in the original 1948 text as well as in the Charter of the United Nations which affirms “the dignity and worth of the human person [and]...the equal rights of men and women of nations large and small”.

In the words of the Punta del Este Declaration, “Human dignity for everyone everywhere...is the foundational principle and the key objective or goal of human rights”.

This two-day conference takes up that mandate, seeking to understand how we move from the vision to the reality of a world where everyone is respected and valued no matter who they are where they come from or where they go.

For, in spite of human dignity being enshrined in world religions and international declarations, it is clear that we have not realised the goal of “dignity for everyone everywhere” just yet.

Discrimination, prejudice, and war poverty: these and other harmful forces work in almost every corner of our world every single day to strip people of their essential human dignity. It is immensely challenging to take the theory - the ideal vision of a world where everyone is respected - and to put it into practice.

That is precisely why this conference is such an important event. Here, we seek

to turn words and ideals into concrete practical actions and policies.

Real-world stories

In what remains of my speech today I want to share three real-world stories of individuals who have done just that - advocating for universal human dignity and working to build inclusive cohesive societies not only in what they say but also in what they do.

My first story I am proud to say hails from right here in Malaysia. Last year at a conference organised by Ikim, the Bishop of Kuching Reverend Donald Jute recounted an incident in 2010 at his church.

This was a time of tension between Muslims and Christians and on the morning of Jan 10, 2010, the reverend awoke to see that bricks had been thrown at the church breaking a stained-glass window.

When the press assembled, they expected Reverend Jute to blame Muslims for the violence; but instead of inflaming the situation he simply responded, "We really don't want to speculate on the incident and we don't want to blame anybody as we don't know who is behind this."

His only wish was not for retribution but for peace: "We hope and pray," he said,

“that the incident will not become worse and spread to other churches and other houses of worship in Miri and elsewhere in Sarawak”.

By defusing the situation and offering a voice of calm, the church was able to continue its longstanding friendly relationship with the An-Naim Mosque located next door.

As the mosque’s chairperson had commented only a few months previously “When we heard the church’s bell ring we know it’s their time to pray and when they hear the azan (call to prayer) they know it’s our time. We’ve had a long good neighbourliness.”

If Reverend Jute had responded with anger and blame, he might have further destabilised the situation increasing the risk of violence at other houses of worship. This good relationship between the mosque and the church might well have been destroyed.

Instead, by simply calling for calm, Reverend Jute protected the essential human dignity of all those in the wider community.

My second story comes from India where the Sikh community is known for their dedication to providing for the poor and needy regardless of their backgrounds. Sikh philosophy stresses that all human beings are equal: “Recognise the human

race as one”.

As an extension of this, they believe in “langar” – providing free meals to anyone who needs them. The principles of Sikhism state that “everyone is welcome to share in the free food served in the gurdwara’s langar the community kitchen” including “the homeless the destitute the lonely students and anyone else who is in need of help”.

The Golden Temple in Amritsar the holiest gurdwara in Sikhism famously provides up to 300,000 free meals each day. The temple is open 24 hours a day seven days a week welcoming all faiths and nationalities with the guiding philosophy: “With folded hands, Nanak seeks this blessing: May no one be turned away from the Guru’s door empty-handed.”

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, langar has expanded even further. Noting how the pandemic had negatively impacted families economically, the Nishkam Sikh Welfare Council developed their own specific “Langar Relief Drive”, providing cooked food rations to more than 1,000 people every day in Delhi.

A volunteer at the Council said “Our Sikh teachings are very clear: you must help others regardless of their race religion or nationality. We are committed to human dignity and to feeding people in need. That’s why we do what we do.”

My third story is about a Pakistani girl Malala Yousafzai. At the age, of 15, Malala was shot by the Taliban for advocating for female education. But she recovered and went on to become an international symbol of the right to education for all human beings.

In 2014, Malala became the youngest-ever recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize sharing the award with Indian children's rights activist Kailash Satyarthi.

The Nobel Committee praised Malala for her "heroic struggle" noting that "Despite her youth, Malala has already fought for several years for the rights of girls to education and has shown by example that children and young people too can contribute to improving their own situations."

Malala continues to advocate for human dignity through education worldwide. She has said: "We realise the importance of our voices only when we are silenced."

She calls upon everyone regardless of their background to raise their voices for the dignity of others.

"I tell my story not because it is unique but because it is the story of many girls.

"Today I tell their stories too. I am Malala but I am also Shazia. I am Kainat. I am

Kainat Soomro. I am Mozhdah. I am Amina. I am those 66 million girls who are deprived of education.”

Necessary vision

Reverend Jute, the Sikh community, and Malala: these are just three examples of individuals and communities who have defended human dignity through their words and actions.

They have shown us what is possible in Malaysia, India, Pakistan and beyond: how human dignity for everyone everywhere can become not just an ideal but a lived reality.

I hope their stories will inspire us to follow their lead: to take concrete practical steps to make the vision of this conference a reality.

To conclude, I want to reiterate the importance of today’s event and to congratulate the organisers for what promises to be a stimulating two days of discussions.

The range of speakers and delegates here is truly impressive and their backgrounds are so diverse, reflecting the inclusive nature of this event.

The message of this conference is ultimately a very hopeful one: the belief that we can build inclusive societies in which the dignity of everyone everywhere is recognised and respected.

This is a challenging but necessary vision and one which we must strive towards with commitment and passion. As we move through the conference sessions let us remember our shared goal: to build a world where human dignity for everyone everywhere is not just an aspiration but a reality.

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